

Officials see need to reduce elk damage in Skagit Valley

A lesson for the North Coast?

By **KIMBERLY CAUVEL**
Skagit Valley Herald

MOUNT VERNON, Wash. — Elk are easy to spot against the green backdrop of the Skagit Valley, where much of the resident North Cascades elk herd that has grown to an estimated 1,600 is found.

For farmers in the area — especially those who grow grass for their cattle or to sell to other beef or dairy farms — those elk have become increasingly problematic.

Some Skagit County landowners and officials have deemed the intrusion of elk on private property to be illegal.

Hamilton area beef farmer Randy Good, who is vice president of the Skagit County Cattlemen's Association, said the state Department of Fish and Wildlife is breaking the law by allowing an increasing elk population to damage crops and homes.

A state mandate for Fish and Wildlife states: "Nothing in this title shall be construed to infringe on the right of a private property owner to control the owner's private property."

The Skagit County Board of Commissioners agrees. In a February letter to Fish and Wildlife, the commissioners asked that the agency comply with the law in question "immediately by removing elk off the valley floor ... by any means necessary."

Fish and Wildlife Deputy Director Amy Windrope has publicly recognized the issue.

"We have some statutory obligations as well as proviso language that says we need to address the elk damage issues in the Skagit Valley," she said during a Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting in April.

Windrope told the Fish and Wildlife Commission she has heard from several landowners affected by elk, including many during the previ-



Elk graze in the rain in a field near Birdsview east of Sedro-Woolley, Wash.

Charles Biles/Skagit Valley Herald

ous damage year, from July through March.

"The damage issues are continuing. We had over 100 complaints this (damage) year, so we are under a microscope as well as a lot of pressure to resolve this issue," she said.

Some landowners from along Highway 20 and the Skagit River spoke to the commission in April.

"You have a lot of elk up in the hills that are finding out there's better grass, less predators and it's kind of a welfare state (in the valley) right now," Skagit County Farm Bureau President Bill Schmidt said.

Janis Schweitzer, who has had flowers eaten and landscaping trampled by elk, urged the commission to help.

"Some farmers may be out of business, which is really sad, if we don't do something," she said.

A call to cull

Those suffering property damage and financial losses due to elk want the number of animals in the herd reduced.

"There needs to be a culling," dairy farmer Derek Blanken said while discussing the issue during a rainy day in March.

Some said they believe more hunting should be

allowed in the valley and avoided in the forested hills enclosing it.

"I would like to see the agricultural zone between South Skagit Highway and Highway 20 have more of an open season ... to try to keep the numbers down on the agricultural land," Schmidt said. "We need a little more coordination between hunting and farming."

Cindy Ovenell-Kleinhuizen, who runs the Double O Ranch south of Concrete, said she believes more hunting is needed because for young elk born in the valley, it's the only home they've known and where they are likely to stay.

"The only way to fix it is to eliminate them," she said.

Eliminating the elk herd, which the state and treaty tribes are tasked with managing and are interested in preserving, is out of the question.

But Fish and Wildlife regional biologist Fenner Yarborough said the state agency recently adopted new hunting regulations that were set in part to reduce property damage.

The new regulations will increase the number of elk from the North Cascades herd that can be killed in the Skagit Valley by 32 animals per hunting season — 16 more for

both nontribal and tribal hunters — starting this year.

The new regulations will also add some time for non-tribal hunting in January, Yarborough said. Those changes are an effort to encourage the elk into the hills.

"We need them out of the valley and back into the forests," Windrope said. "For that we have different tools in our toolbox: We have fencing, we have nonlethal hazing and we have hunting — and we need to use them all."

She said several tribes in the region, including the Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians, were opposed to the hunting increases, but the state believes some expansion was warranted.

"The science supports us increasing the harvest this year. I think it's an important step," Windrope said.

Upper Skagit Indian Tribe Natural Resources Director Scott Schuyler said the tribe, which frequently sees elk on its reservation east of Sedro-Woolley, was not one of those that opposed the new regulations.

He said the Upper Skagit tribe agrees that the growing herd should be able to support increased hunting opportunities.

The Stillaguamish, Sauk-

Suittle and Lummi tribes feel otherwise, according to a March letter to Fish and Wildlife.

"The North Cascades elk herd has been and continues to be critically important to the Point Elliot Treaty tribes and any effort to reduce herd growth ... is not only a threat to our culture, tradition, subsistence and religion, it is an erosion of our guaranteed treaty rights," the letter states.

Windrope said she understands some tribes are concerned about slowing progress to restore the herd, but the effort to push elk out of the valley will benefit everyone.

"It doesn't do any of us any good to have the elk in the valley on agricultural lands, where the tribes can't hunt them and we can't hunt them," she said.

Indiscriminate destruction

Perhaps the greatest challenge with the growing elk herd is that the animals will eat just about anything.

From apple and cherry trees to towering Douglas firs, nearly every tree on Schmidt's property bears scars from hungry elk. He said they've eaten apples off trees, broken branches off cedars and rubbed bark off maples.

They will gnaw at the bark of various types of trees, sometimes killing young trees and destroying investments, Schmidt said as he pointed to a young Douglas fir eaten by elk about 30 years before it would have been large enough to harvest.

Larger trees can also be destroyed or lose value.

As elk teeth tear into a tree's bark, they create an entrance for beetles and fungus, Schmidt said.

He said he's had to cut down some trees that were weakened at the bases and carve away rotten sections of others that could have been valuable wood.

Potted flowers also attract elk.

Schweitzer said she spent an afternoon chasing elk out of Forest Park Cemetery west of Concrete after finding elk eating blooms out of pots she placed at the graves of her mother and her husband.

Schmidt said he has seen up to 105 elk at a time on his land near Concrete. That's a lot of animals trampling and chomping their way through 2.5 acres meant to support him through timber sales.

It's not uncommon to see dozens of elk in one field.

Ovenell-Kleinhuizen said elk have eaten so much grass out of her fields and hay from her bales that in 2013 she had to purchase feed from elsewhere for the first time since the family ranch was established in the 1940s.

Since 2013, she said she has spent \$37,305 on feed.

Several landowners said it's difficult to calculate exactly how much the damage caused by elk has cost them. When elk graze in a grass field, for example, the impact can be felt for years.

"Every year they graze it down too much, so the next year it comes back slower and it comes back less," Ovenell-Kleinhuizen said. "It's hard to put a dollar amount on that."

She and other landowners said the \$192,810 Fish and Wildlife has paid to area farmers since 2002 for elk damage is a fraction of the cost to those affected.

"It's pittance compared to everybody's damages," Schmidt said.

That issue was discussed at the annual east county forum Skagit County officials held in Concrete.

The Skagit County commissioners agree that the costs of elk damage need to be addressed.

"The increasing number of elk on the valley floor ... have negative economic impacts far beyond the minimal reimbursements available," they said in their letter to Fish and Wildlife.

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