

# Golf course sees fix to elk hordes in trap, transfer

State says plan would be costly, not yield results

By R.J. Marx  
Seaside Signal

One man's natural wonder is another man's nuisance.

While representatives of the Gearhart Golf Links don't want to rid the city of elk, they would like to see the herd reduced. And after a dramatic incident involving beachgoers menaced by an elk cow, they feel that the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife — the organization responsible for the elk's stewardship — has not done enough to pursue property protections and ensure public safety.

"We've been working on getting the elk removed, the herd size reduced for years now," Gearhart's Russ Earl said Tuesday, July 25, at a meeting with Gearhart Golf Links General Manager Jason Bangild and Superintendent Forrest Goodling. "We've had (meetings with) four different levels of Fish and Wildlife people, up to the executive director, and we've gotten exactly the same results."

If the herds had been managed properly in the past, it would not of been such a big issue now, they say.

Their latest attempt to discourage the elk — up to 100 in the herd, they say — involved the use of coyote decoys and coyote urine, designed to remind the elk of their predators. Landscape crews sprinkled the coyote urine on the eight plastic coyotes strategically placed on the perimeter of the 100-acre, 18-hole golf course — the oldest golf course in Oregon and one of several area courses facing the problem.

"They've basically said, 'Put some signs up around the golf course,'" Earl said. "That didn't help us at all."

## Safety at issue

While the course faces tens of thousands of dollars of damage caused by elk, the risk to human safety reached a head this month when an elk cow protecting its calf charged a bicyclist in Gearhart, days after menacing beachgoers,



JEFF TER HAR/EO MEDIA GROUP

Making their way from the Gearhart Golf Links over to Gearhart Palisades, a herd of elk find food in residents' yards in 2014.

children and dogs. The elk was tranquilized and brought to safety by police, firefighters and officials from the Department of Fish and Wildlife. The elk calf was also tranquilized and reunited with its mother at God's Valley in Tillamook State Forest.

The incident stirred public sentiment and led to a call to action.

"You can tell from the last two weeks of elk incidents, someone is going to get killed," Goodling said. "There are plenty of people pushing strollers. If a bicycle spooks that herd and it goes around the corner, there's no stopping them. I've seen them jump over a 6-foot concrete fence one after the other."

Bangild said the Gearhart herd has at least "doubled or tripled" in the six years he has been here. "That's way too many for a small town," he said.

"I used to take my son down to the estuary for walks, but now I am much more cautious. You are stuck out there."

## Transport urged

Bangild, Earl and Goodling each said they don't want to kill elk — hunting is prohibited in Gearhart — only to move them out of the city to reserves like God's Valley or Circle Creek.

"We are not seeking to eliminate the entire herd, but at least get the herd down to



R.J. MARX/SEASIDE SIGNAL

Jason Bangild, Forrest Goodling and Russ Earl are looking for more involvement from the state in managing Gearhart's elk population.

where it is safe for the town residents," Goodling said.

But transport has its limits, Dave Nuzum, acting wildlife biologist of the Department of Fish and Wildlife, said Tuesday.

Nuzum has been coming to Gearhart for several years, meeting with city leadership, the public and golf interests.

In 2014, the city asked the department to come up with a cost estimate for the transport of 75 percent of the herd.

The total cost for trapping was estimated at \$14,000 for a one-month effort, which could bring in "an optimistic number of 50," more likely 30, Nuzum said.

One day of darting, which would tranquilize the elk, is \$1,472 per animal. Fewer than 10 elk could be darted

and transported per day.

## A 'suite' of responses

A public workshop and subsequent meetings with the department identified "a suite" of responses, including hazing, fencing and exclusion.

"Transplanting was part of that," Nuzum said.

What complicates matters is the dichotomy of interests between those who want to get rid of the elk and "an even more greater number of people who love the elk," he said. "They don't want anything done."

Trap and transplant, as suggested by the golf course officials, is a popular suggestion, he said, but of limited value.



COLIN MURPHEY/EO MEDIA GROUP

Decoys designed to look like coyotes have been deployed around the Gearhart Golf Links facility to try to ward off of elk.

to make that much of a dent in the population," he said. "If you were able to remove a higher percentage, they breed. You would be back in the same boat in a very short amount of time."

And in a city like Gearhart, where elk occupy an almost mythic role, residents may tamper with traps.

"Inevitably your traps are going to get vandalized by folks who are opposed to it," Nuzum said. "Somebody always has to mess with them."

## 'Stalag 17'

Fencing is the only "100 percent sure way" of keeping elk out of any area, he said, whether a dairy pasture, orchard or a golf course. "The downside of that is aesthetically, you don't want the place to look like Stalag 17."

There are a number of ways to make fencing more attractive, but exclusion has consequences, he added. "Say you were to put up an impenetrable fence around the golf course — problem solved. Well, there are still elk going around town."

Nuzum's response may not satisfy Bangild, Earl or Goodling, who say they have been down this path before.

"I can't believe it's up to us to come up with a plan," Bangild said. "We're trying to run a golf course. I spend more hours than I ever thought I would coming up with a solution."

# Law keeps park help from being tripped up

Workers get immunity from some lawsuits

By Katie Frankowicz  
EO Media Group

City workers in charge of maintaining public parks will get immunity from liability under a new state law.

The law, signed by Gov. Kate Brown in June, was one of the top priorities of the League of Oregon Cities for the legislative session. "It's exactly what we asked for," said Scott Winkler, intergovernmental relations associate with the league.

A previous version of the statute appeared to leave city employees legally vulnerable if someone hurt themselves while using city parks — if they tripped on a crack along the Astoria Riverwalk, for instance.

Last year, the Oregon Supreme Court ruled that while cities have immunity from liability on the recreational lands they own, city workers or volunteers responsible for maintaining public parks do not.

The ruling stemmed from a review of a 2009 lawsuit brought against Portland by a legally blind jogger. She sued



DANNY MILLER/EO MEDIA GROUP

Erosion and storm damage is visible along the Astoria Riverwalk in December 2015.

the city and city maintenance workers after she stepped into a hole at a city park and injured herself.

The Supreme Court maintained that the Oregon Public Use of Lands Act, which shields from liability public and private property owners who allow public recreation on their lands for free, did not specifically extend this immunity to employees — a worrying development for cities across the state.

There were also concerns that this lack of immunity would lead to higher insurance costs for cities.

The League of Oregon Cities and others pushed to change the statute so it would once again recognize recreational immunity for city workers. "The words on the bill were pretty simple, but the impact around the state

was profound," Winkler said.

## Astoria parks

In Astoria, the uncertainty before the new law was passed did not halt any park activities or close down any sites.

City Attorney Blair Henningsgaard was not convinced the ruling put the city at a higher legal risk.

"We make every effort to operate our parks safely," he told The Daily Astorian last year. "I don't think that it creates a greater degree of liability in either the city or employees than existed beforehand."

Other cities, however, shut down parks, worried about

what it would mean if their staff and volunteers were not covered. In total, 12 parks around the state closed after the Oregon Supreme Court ruling.

Redmond only last weekend reopened a popular climbing bridge, which had been closed after the court ruling, according to Winkler.

Though Astoria parks didn't close, the city was concerned about getting the bill through the Legislature, said City Manager Brett Estes. City officials wanted to make sure there was coverage for city staff.

Though a simple bill in theory, it was hard to get through the system, Winkler said.

"The votes were there on the floor, but getting it through the procedural process was a challenge," he said.

Some legislators in the House had reservations about moving the bill forward and there were conversations about possible amendments. The bill was up for its final reading multiple days, but kept getting carried over.

"We're gratified the votes were there," Winkler said.

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