



State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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February 28, 2023

Skagit County Board of Commissioners
1800 Continental Place
Mount Vernon, WA 98273

Dear Commissioners:

Thank you for your letter dated October 31, 2022, apologies for the delayed response. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) would like to provide clarification on the two elk conflict solutions proposed in the letter and address some additional elk conflict management topics.

WDFW has dedicated staff working on this issue and are deploying various strategies to manage the human-elk conflict within Skagit Valley. Along with the logistical hurdles associated with any large-scale wildlife conflict mitigation, this complicated and challenging issue is further compounded by differing values, perceptions, tolerances, and priorities of groups interested in management of the North Cascades Elk Herd, including landowners, Native American tribes, elected officials, stakeholders, community and conservation groups, and Washington residents; all of whom have voiced their concerns and preferences in different ways. Major concerns include, but are not limited to, agriculture interests, tribal treaty rights, wildlife conservation issues, hunting interests, and public safety considerations.

Solution 1 - Implement WDFW's August 16, 2016, attached agreement with farmers to move elk to state and federal forest lands

In terms of a suggested agreement with farmers in 2016 to move elk to state and federal lands, WDFW emphasized that we would continue to use tools such as hazing, hunting, and landowner permits to encourage elk off agricultural areas. This was listed as an objective in the 2018 North Cascades Elk Herd Plan. Though these techniques are not 100% effective, WDFW will continue to work with landowners using these and other tools tailored to the unique conditions for a given property.

Removal of elk from the valley - all or even a substantial number, either by lethal removal or capture and translocation is not feasible or realistic given challenges associated with private property ownership and differing tolerances towards elk, as well as elk biology, seasonal behaviors, and other factors. The effort required to move elk from the valley and permanently keep them out would be monumental, requiring several additional full-time WDFW staff and indefinite

and significant annual expenditures of time and money, with no guarantee of achieving the desired outcome.

Though hunting can be a useful tool in reducing damage to individual properties, using many hunters in a sustained and continual effort to push elk off the valley floor is likely not a feasible solution, due largely to property access issues. See the discussion under Solution 2 for more details.

Solution 2 - Reinstate WDFW's open hunting season which has successfully kept elk off Skagit farms on the valley floor in the past

WDFW views recreational hunting and landowner permits as important tools to reduce elk numbers and potentially pressure them away from areas where conflict is high. Since 2018, WDFW has increased elk hunting opportunities on the valley floor each year, with increased recreational special permits, landowner damage permits, and one of the longest hunting seasons in the state. We opened Game Management Unit (GMU) 437 to hunting in 2021 to increase hunting access for state hunters and further respond to commercial agriculture damage issues. Though hunting can be effective, this conflict management tool, like all others, has its limitations, and this tool's success is dependent on other factors including access to private property and blocks of public land for which there may be limited public access.

The vast majority of Skagit Valley is privately owned with landowners increasingly restricting public access and thus effectively providing refugia for elk. Additionally, there are several large tracts of public land in Skagit Valley, with the largest owned and managed by the U.S. Forest Service. These public tracts of land are thickly vegetated and largely landlocked, with public access only via private property or by boat along the Skagit River. Elk that move onto these public lands likely face very little hunting pressure due to the limited access for state hunters.

In the past, when general season hunting was available, hunters likely had more opportunities for private property access, and elk refugia in Skagit Valley was much less prevalent. The current challenges with land access have resulted in decreased opportunities for elk hazing, lethal removal, and elk conflict management. Thus, we have seen a decrease in elk being harvested by landowner and recreational hunting throughout Skagit Valley.

While a general season would draw large numbers of hunters to the valley, issues with limited access likely would not result in many additional elk harvested. Further, more hunters in concentrated areas could lead to increased traffic during hunting season, public safety issues (e.g., pushing elk onto roads, firearm-related injuries, etc.), sporadic property damage, and trespassing complaints, creating the potential for additional burdens to many property owners. Ultimately, improving access is key to making our current hunting permit levels and efforts more successful.

Funding for Human-Elk Conflict

Whenever supplementary funds are provided by the Washington State Legislature, WDFW incorporates other useful tools including the purchase and distribution of fencing materials, fertilizer, and seed reimbursement contracts. During the previous biennium, WDFW provided

more than \$600,000 in fencing materials and over \$90,000 in damage claims to landowners in Skagit Valley.

Hoof Disease

WDFW understands the concerns held by some landowners regarding treponeme-associated hoof disease (TAHD) in elk and the potential for its spread to domestic livestock. Importantly, no research to date has shown that elk can spread TAHD to cattle, though further research may shed additional light on this possibility. The worldwide dairy industry has dealt with a form of hoof disease called digital dermatitis for many decades before TAHD was discovered in elk, and the potential for hoof disease transmission between wild and domestic species is unknown. Unlike with domestic cattle, currently there is no treatment available for free-ranging elk.

Fortunately, anecdotal evidence suggests the prevalence of TAHD in the North Cascades elk herd is much lower than in southwest Washington where hoof disease prevalence is greatest; we estimate that less than 10% of the North Cascades elk population is impacted by the disease.

WDFW is actively trying to harvest limping elk in Skagit Valley to address landowner concerns, reduce suffering of elk with TAHD, and potentially reduce the spread of TAHD between elk. We are using the following tools to harvest limping elk:

1. Landowner Damage Permits – along with general damage permits that allow the taking of an antlered or antlerless elk, WDFW has issued several damage permits that require a landowner to only harvest a limping elk. This has been successful in the past and will be an important tool moving forward.
2. Targeted removals – WDFW opportunistically removes limping elk when conditions allow for a safe and humane harvest. This harvest method is useful but also challenging, due to issues with access, safety, elk movements, and understandable delays between a limping elk sighting and arrival of Department staff or volunteers. WDFW, along with Tribal Co-Managers, will proactively continue to remove limping elk through targeted removals whenever possible.
3. Master Hunters – WDFW issues 13 Master Hunter special permits annually to address elk conflict issues in Skagit and Acme valleys. When limping elk have been spotted in an elk conflict area, Master Hunters may be instructed to specially target a limping elk.
4. Elk Hoof Disease Incentive Program – Beginning in the 2021 license year, WDFW started a program to evaluate how hunters can help reduce the prevalence of elk hoof disease by offering an incentive to harvest limping elk. To do so, WDFW offers an exclusive draw opportunity for western Washington general elk season and most special permit elk hunters who successfully harvest an elk. Hunters can participate by submitting the hooves of their harvest to WDFW. If the hooves display signs of hoof disease (abnormal hooves), hunters will have a chance to draw a premium elk tag the following license year.

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Thank you for your letter and proposed solutions. WDFW is committed to continuing to work with the county, local residents, Tribes, and others to reduce conflicts between people and elk in the Skagit Valley.

Additional information on the North Cascades Elk Herd is available in this June 2022 report from WDFW: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/02343>.

If you have questions or would like to discuss further, please reach out to North Puget Sound Regional Director, Brendan Brokes, at (425) 341-2058 or Brendan.brokes@dfw.wa.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kelly Susewind".

Kelly Susewind
Director