



# North Cascades Elk Management Update

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

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## Background

During the 2016 Legislative Session, state lawmakers introduced a proviso related to the North Cascades elk herd:

*(10) Within amounts provided in this section, the department must consult with affected tribes and landowners in Skagit county to develop and implement a plan designed to address elk-related agricultural damage and vehicular collisions by using all available and appropriate methods including, but not limited to, cooperative fencing projects and harvest in order to minimize elk numbers on private lands and maximize the number of elk located on state and federal lands. The plan must be implemented by September 1, 2018.*

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) will finalize the North Cascades Elk Herd (NCEH) Plan in the month of September. However, portions of the plan (outlined below) are already being implemented. The NCEH Plan received extensive public review and incorporated comments from the public and from tribes. The NCEH Plan outlines WDFW goals, strategies, and specific actions to manage the entire herd over the coming 10 years and is WDFW's overarching approach for addressing agricultural damage and vehicular collisions.

WDFW is pursuing, with the Point Elliott Treaty Tribes (Tribes), an "all tools" approach to the Skagit Valley elk issues. We believe that we must move towards fewer elk grazing on agricultural lands. To achieve this goal, WDFW and Tribes are employing all the available tools: non-lethal hazing, hunting, fencing, gathering more information to understand elk movements, improving and increasing habitat in upland areas, providing damage compensation when needed, maintaining conflict specialists at WDFW, collaborative problem solving, and working with stakeholders. The list of actions we have taken in the last year are listed below and provide a finer level of detail to support implementation of the 10-year management plan and demonstrate the "all tools" approach.

## Strategies to Address Elk-Related Damage and Collisions

### Increase Habitat in Forests

WDFW is currently working with the Tribes, United States Forest Service (USFS), Puget Sound Energy, Seattle City Light, and Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) to improve elk habitat and forage on state and federal lands away from the agricultural areas. WDFW met with USFS, Seattle City Light, and RMEF to brainstorm additional actions to improve wildlife corridors and increases in habitat. Several ideas WDFW is current exploring include forage enhancement, land purchases for elk habitat, forest-thinning projects to increase understory productions, and increased monitoring of elk movements in these areas.

### Increase Pressure to Move Elk away from Private Lands

To efficiently and safely minimize elk numbers on private lands and maximize the number of elk located on state and federal lands, WDFW has increased hunting season lengths (extended by three weeks) and harvest management strategies (increase in number of licenses, hunting in Skagit Valley includes a cow hunt, increase in youth, senior, and disabled permits, and an increase in archery hunting) in the Skagit and Acme Valleys to apply consistent and prolonged harvest pressure on elk residing within the valley bottoms. This effort is, and will continue to be, implemented to modify elk behavior over time and subsequent generations. Additionally, this effort will seek to push elk into more favorable and elk tolerant areas, and target specific problem groups of animals, sex and age classes. WDFW has increased the number of damage permits provided to private landowners from 2017 levels. WDFW has worked with Point Elliott Treaty Tribes to encourage tribal hunting on private property experiencing damage.

In addition to increasing lethal pressure, WDFW in coordination with Point Elliott Treaty Tribes are enhancing and increasing non-lethal pressure on elk in Skagit Valley. As the 2018 season begins, the co-managers are working on coordinated hazing approaches. We are increasing hazing early in the 2018 season in order to dissuade elk from entering the Valley while we are increasing hunting. WDFW hopes that the combined approach will yield increased movement of elk off the Valley floor.

### Increase Collaborative Conversations

WDFW has met every three to four months with agricultural producers since September 2016 to develop and implement a plan designed to address elk-related agricultural damage and vehicular collisions. WDFW hosted an appreciation lunch for citizens and Tribes participating in the first-ever Valley floor survey. This event was designed as a “meet and greet” for all those involved in this issue: elected officials, agricultural producers, concerned citizens, and tribal policy and technical staff. WDFW also hosted the first collaborative conversation with agricultural producers, Farm Bureau,

Cattlemen's Association, and Point Elliott Treaty Tribes. WDFW has stayed in close contact with Skagit County Council, Senator Wagoner, and Representative Eslick throughout this time period.

- Landowner meetings (8/28/2017, 10/24/17,11/1/2017, 12/18/17, 4/9/18, 6/26/2018)
- Herd Plan Public Meeting (8/29/2017)
- Tribal meetings (11/30/2017, 4/26/2018)
- Co-Managers/landowner meetings (6/26/18)
- Community lunch with tribes and landowners (February 2018)
- Washington State Department of Transportation meeting (10/17/17)
- United States Forest Service (1/10/2018)

WDFW will continue to convene stakeholder and co-managers meetings throughout the coming the years.

### Continually Respond to Reports of Damage

WDFW continues to have two full-time staff dealing with conflict issues throughout the area. Throughout each year, WDFW staff monitor agricultural fields in coordination with agricultural producers to ensure there is no elk-related crop damage or damage to property (e.g., fencing). In response to damage reports that met state WAC and RCW qualification standards, WDFW Wildlife Conflict staff issued 40 landowner permits during the 2016-2017 damage season (July 1-March 31). Similarly, WDFW Wildlife Conflict staff issued 52 landowner permits during the 2017-2018 damage season. During the 2016-2017 damage season, WDFW staff recorded a minimum of 65 elk-related damage complaints. From this, 61.5% of these cases were issued at least one landowner damage permit to remove an offending animal. During the 2017-2018 damage season, WDFW staff recorded a minimum of 74 elk-related damage complaints. From this, 70.2% of these cases were issued at least one landowner damage permit, though there were some properties that received more, to remove offending animals.

### Improve Information about Elk Presence and Distribution

In 2018, WDFW, in cooperation with Tribes and landowners, implemented a new survey protocol to more accurately count the elk within and outside the Skagit and Acme Valleys and the surrounding uplands. The combination of helicopter and driving surveys covered previously unsurveyed areas. These surveys will help to more accurately describe the elk population across the herd area and will help determine management actions.

In 2018, WDFW and the Tribes have identified the need to increase the number of collared elk such that managers have both better population estimates and movement information. Increased funds for conflict specialists and collars would increase WDFW's effectiveness in dealing with agricultural damage.

## Increase State and Tribal Hunting Opportunities

WDFW has increased elk special permits in and around the Skagit Valley for the third consecutive year. For 2018-2019, there are 12 cow (female elk) tags for youth, senior, and disabled hunters, 26 bull (male elk) tags, and 18 cow tags for master hunters for Skagit Valley. This is an increase of 28% from 2017-2018. The total number of elk special permits issued to state permit hunters is 74. This does not include damage harvest. WDFW has also increased hunting season length from the end of December to mid-January to increase harvest success and hunting pressure. Tribal hunting opportunity has also increased in Game Management Unit (GMU) 418 and 437. In surrounding GMU's 407 and 448, there is a general season for any elk.

## Cooperative Fencing Project

WDFW, the Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians, and stakeholders conducted a total of 50 individual purchases, for a total of 31 landowners, from December 2015 to September 2017. These projects provided 85,794 linear feet of materials to participating landowners. The total grant amount was for \$300,000, with WDFW receiving \$54,000 to fund a person to build fences, and the Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians received \$36,900 in indirect. This left an applied grant total of \$209,100 for cooperative fencing projects. A total of \$208,750 was spent on these projects. This left a remaining balance of \$360 as of September 2017. Additional and remaining general fence materials are still being applied today to assist participating landowners with elk exclusionary fence projects across the Acme and Skagit Valleys.

## Reducing Vehicle Collisions

WDFW and the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) have worked together to deploy GPS collars on three elk to determine approach and crossing areas near Highway 20. WDFW has improved data collection related to elk vehicle collisions, including milepost information, sex and age of animal, and time of day. This will help to identify areas that need signage, fencing, etc. Currently, the annual number of elk vehicle collisions is not an immediate priority for WSDOT.

## Private Land Access for Elk Hunting with Damage Prevention Agreements

To address elk-related damage in the Skagit and Acme agricultural valleys, WDFW's conflict program and private lands program have worked cooperatively to gain access to private lands to address elk-related damage. These private lands provide high success elk hunting opportunities while attempting to reduce or eliminate elk presence on private property.

WDFW currently has 33 active WDFW Damage Prevention Cooperative Agreements (DPCA) with private landowners in Skagit and Whatcom Counties providing hunter access to over 2,000 acres of land. Twenty-four of the properties are located in Elk Area 4941, which is designated as an elk

conflict zone. One dairy producer in Skagit County allows WDFW to place signage on his property to advertise that the property is open to hunting with written permission from the landowner. This landowner will be enrolled in the Private Lands Access Program for the upcoming season as a Hunt by Written Permission property. There are currently two agricultural producers in Skagit County that have chosen not to sign a damage prevention contracts but have given discretion to WDFW conflict staff to allow hunter access as necessary to address elk-related damage.

In the Acme Valley, there are currently six agricultural producers that have DPCA contracts with WDFW. These producers allow some form of public hunting access. In addition to utilizing DPCA contracts, two large dairy producers in the Acme Valley also provide access through WDFW's Private Land Access Program. The two properties in Acme encompass approximately 500 acres of land. One of the properties is managed as feel free to hunt, with any legal weapon allowed with up to three hunters at any given time. The other property is managed through the Hunt by Reservation system with firearm restriction rules at the landowner request. Landowners who are enrolled in the Private Land Access Program are paid \$1,000 each season. These funds are available via the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Bill, Voluntary Access Program Grant funding which WDFW competes for and applies for elk, deer, waterfowl, and other recreational access for the general public. WDFW works with landowners to designate a parking place and install signage on the property that designate the rules and property boundaries. WDFW Law Enforcement staff also patrol these enrolled properties and assist with enforcing regulations and safety measures. These properties are currently on their third year of enrollment and overall satisfaction from the landowners has been good.

See story on successful youth hunter in Skagit Valley:

<https://www.bdoutdoors.com/forums/threads/youth-success-and-the-wdfw-damage-folks-nailed-it.668039/>

## Crop Damage Compensation

WDFW, stakeholders, county officials, and Washington State Representative Eslick held meetings to discuss ideas, opportunities and future options for crop damage compensation processes across the Skagit and Acme Valleys. Since 2016, there have been no claims submitted through the crop damage compensation process from Skagit or Whatcom Counties. A sub-group was formed and met twice (in May 2018 and June 2018) to discuss the following objectives:

1. Work through key questions related to crop/grass compensation claims and develop new and/or expand ideas moving forward.
2. Review the current commercial crop compensation standards and process.
3. Identify follow-up actions and next steps from the 5/23/2018 meeting.
4. Review and work through follow-up questions and actions from the 5/23/2018 meeting.
5. Brainstorm, identify opportunities, and develop ideas moving forward.
6. Compile findings and formulate a potential plan of action before the 2018 damage season (July 1–March 31) begins.

Many actions and ideas were identified and shared at these meetings. Across all of the stated objectives, all were accomplished except for #6. Objective #6 consists mainly of policy-level changes that will require a prolonged duration of time to address and implement, therefore those identified actions could not be finalized before the 2018 damage season. All ideas and actions will be presented to and addressed with stakeholders at upcoming meetings, and possibly addressed via formal policy change processes. Key questions that were addressed via this group process included:

- Why is WDFW receiving so few claims each year regarding grass damage/loss?
- What process would work for producers and what doesn't work for the different type of producer (e.g., cattle producer, dairy, sheep, goat, etc.)
- Is there or what is the threshold of tolerance for how much money a producer can lose before it takes too much of a toll on the business? How do we support this need over time? Is there a lower damage threshold value that would work support WDFW compensation payout action?
- Could Calpril® be explored as an alternative compensation solution in some cases?
- What are the current WDFW commercial crop compensation standards and process?
- What is the current WDFW Commercial Crop Compensation Process and how has this process been streamlined over time to benefit producers?
- How does a commercial crop compensation appeals process function?
- What is the history of the landowner-WDFW cost-share obligation and when was it developed?
- Is relief for Small Private Non-Industrial Timber Companies related to tree damage loss eligible for compensation? If so, what is the associated processes?
- How does leased property fit into the compensation claim process?



## North Cascades Elk Herd Plan Update

The primary purpose of the NCEH Plan is to provide direction for future management of the North Cascades elk herd. The plan will also serve as a valuable reference document and guideline for WDFW, the Point Elliott Treaty Tribes, agency cooperators, private landowners, and the public. As management priorities change, it is WDFW's intent to update this plan as needed. The primary goals of the NCEH Plan are:

1. Preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage elk and their habitat to ensure sustainable populations
2. Manage elk for a variety of recreational, educational, and aesthetic purposes including hunting, wildlife viewing, photography, scientific study, and cultural and ceremonial uses by Native Americans
3. Manage elk populations for a sustainable annual harvest
4. Minimize property damage and public safety risks associated with elk

The plan identifies specific objectives and strategies that address specific challenges in managing the North Cascades elk herd. WDFW has identified the following objectives:

1. The population objective for the North Cascades elk herd is 1,700–2,000. The 2018 aerial survey resulted in 1,600 elk in the survey area and additional 300-500 elk outside of the survey area. The population objective includes the elk within Skagit River Valley, the Acme Valley, and areas where WDFW's intent is to minimize elk/human conflicts and ensure public safety
2. By 2018, implement a monitoring strategy that will provide a sound basis for herd size estimation using acceptable, cost-effective methodologies
3. Increase the geographical area available for hunting on public and private lands by at least 100 square miles by 2021
4. Minimize public safety risk by reducing the average annual number of elk-vehicle collisions along the State Route 20 corridor between Sedro Woolley and Marblemount by 50% over the next five years
5. While attempting to achieve the population objective, reduce the number of elk-caused damage complaints on private lands in the North Cascades elk herd area over the next five years
6. Annually cooperate and collaborate with the Tribes to implement the NCEH Plan and to coordinate season setting and herd management in traditional hunting areas