

https://www.dailyrecordnews.com/bsection/damage-from-elk-continues-to-grow-on-farmlandgroup-attempts-to-find-solutions/article_0247c9de-3a75-53aa-9ffa-7a2fd45e723e.html

Damage from elk continues to grow on farmlandGroup attempts to find solutions

DOUG WARNOCK

Jul 6, 2004

special to the DAILY RECORD

Identifying the reasons that some elk have changed their behavior and are spending time on agricultural land is a major focus of the Big Game Management Roundtable, or BGMR, a group of volunteers interested in alleviating the problem of elk depredation in Kittitas County.

The group started meeting in April of 2003 and have been gathering information and studying the situation since then.

"It is only after the actual causes are identified that a solution can be found," said Jeff Tayer, South Central Regional director of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and one of the originators of the group.

He said the problem of elk damage has continued to grow in recent years and acknowledged agencies and property owners have not been effective in dealing with it.

"We needed to get a focus group working on it, bringing together all of the interests that have a stake in the wildlife and the land," he said.

Come together

The BGMR is composed of farmers and ranchers, the Yakama Nation, the Audubon Society, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Washington Bowhunters, the Kittitas County Field & Stream Club, local real estate agents, the Kittitas County Conservation District, the Kittitas County Cattlemen's Association, the state Department of Natural Resources, Boise Cascade Inc., the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Army, Master Hunters, the Kittitas Environmental Education Network, Washington State University Extension and the Solar \$ group, in addition to the state Department of Fish & Wildlife.

"The roundtable has just completed a document, a white paper if you will, that states the problem, the suspected causes and both a short-term and long-term plan to address the problem," said Dave Duncan, a local rancher and one of the group's founders. "This document will tell potential supporters who we are and what were trying to accomplish. We'll be using it as we contact those who we think might help."

Changes in land use in Kittitas County have affected the behavioral patterns of a number of elk, resulting in depredation on farm and ranch land.

The impact of these concentrations of animals has been felt on haystacks, fences, hay fields, orchards, irrigated pastures and rangeland. The depredation has kept increasing and has changed from being seasonal to being a year-round problem in certain areas.

Negative impacts

The result has been economic loss for some landowners. Dealing with the problem and handling damage claims has become a big cost for the state wildlife agency.

It has also created ill will between the agency and the landowners who aren't getting relief.

The BGMR has identified a number of suspected causes of elk depredation. All are attributed to human activities and management policies that humans have put into place.

"The elk depredation problem is really human caused. It is our collective problem and we all have a responsibility to develop and implement what is needed to alleviate the problem," said Jim Huckabay, a representative of the Kittitas County Field & Stream Club.

Changes in logging practices that affect forestry health and forage quantity are one of the causes believed to contribute to this problem. Also, changes in grazing policies are thought to have led to reduced forage quality and habitat effectiveness.

Water sources for game have been reduced as natural springs have experienced reduced flows or completely dried up due to lack of maintenance.

Homes vs. elk

People have established homes in rural areas that were once part of elk migration routes. Also more people are involved in outdoor recreation and more are spending time in traditional elk habitat areas.

Some landowners have unknowingly created safe havens for elk adjacent to agricultural property that is susceptible to elk depredation. Some elk have become accustomed to people feeding and harboring them.

One of the BGMR committees is developing a geographic information system-generated map that includes reported elk damage complaints and information gathered by the wildlife agency from elk population and habitat surveys. This all helps to show the problem areas in the county and provides valuable information on the relative situation in those areas.

"One of our proposals is to scientifically assess the factors that contribute to elk being attracted to certain areas and, also, to assess the reasons that elk are not staying in desired habitat, so that those areas can be made more attractive," Tayer said.

The assessment will include collecting data on plant species, forage condition and overall ecological health. It will also identify feeding areas, water sources, shelter and the amount of disturbance to game animals.

"This assessment will help BGMR better understand the root causes of elk displacement and distribution," Tayer said.

Making it work

Huckabay said the roundtable, with its short- and long-term strategies in hand, will seek support from people in the county, as well as, supportive leaders in the state Legislature.

Anyone interested in learning more about the Big Game Management Roundtable may contact Jeff Tayer at 509-750-5851, Dave Duncan at 962-1062 or Jim Huckabay at 963-1185.

- Doug Warnock is an agricultural consultant and former Kittitas County-WSU Extension agent.

Big Game Management Roundtable

Mission statement: The mission of the Big Game Management Roundtable is to identify and remedy, as specifically as possible, big game damage to private property and to work collaboratively to improve the overall biological health of wildlife and public lands.

Long-Term goal: The goal of the Big Game Management Roundtable is to:

Reduce the damage done by big game to private property and increase the use by big game of public land. This will reduce the negative economic impact on private property and on the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Enhance big game habitat on public land.

Work proactively and recognize that all stakeholders represented share the responsibility for solving the big game depredation problem. All entities learn from participating in a collaborative process.

Improve the working relationships between private landowners and public land managers.

Educate the general public about the depredation problem, appropriate strategies to address the problem and promote pride of ownership and improved stewardship of public lands.

Create a problem-solving process for use in addressing future big game management problems.

Create stronger communications among the stakeholders and promote collaboration in addressing problems.