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TOP STORY

## Outdoors club and state disagree on wildlife closures

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer  
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The Kittitas County Field and Stream Club says data from a state study of elk behavior doesn't scientifically support closing motorized recreation access to 44,000 acres of wildlife lands northeast of Ellensburg every year from Feb. 1 through April 30.

State wildlife officials respond the study wasn't geared to specifically evaluate the effectiveness of the annual vehicle closure, and there are adequate reasons to justify the closure and to make it permanent.

The issue of closing state recreation road system access to the Whisky Dick Wildlife Area 18 miles northeast of Ellensburg has significantly heated up since a meeting Jan. 7.

State Fish and Wildlife Department officials and biologists told a large crowd in Ellensburg that evening the department intends to continue the three-month closure to reduce human disturbances to the wintering Colockum elk herd, and possibly make it permanent every year.

State Fish and Wildlife Region 3 Director Mike Livingston earlier this week said closures of elk wintering areas to vehicles reduce disturbances to the elk so they can conserve energy at times when they are sometimes at their lowest in regard to body fat, going down to 3 to 5 percent.

"The evidence points to the fact that short road closures reduce disturbances to elk and can improve their well-being during this critical period," Livingston said.

He added that since the closures have been implemented, starting in 2008, there have been fewer claims of property damage from elk made by nearby rural landowners, indicating the elk for the most part are staying in the closure area.

## **Disagreement**

Deborah Essman, Kittitas County Field and Stream Club president, said she's sent letters of concern to state legislators and spoken to Kittitas County's commissioners and Kittitas County Chamber of Commerce officials about the state's lack of science-related reasons to continue the closure that keeps vehicles off Green Dot roads. Visitors can access the area on foot.

In one week, ending Jan. 14, the outdoor club collected 559 signatures of citizens opposed to the three-month vehicle access closure of the Whisky Dick Wildlife Area and portions of the Skookumchuck and Quilomene wildlife areas.

Essman, a former state wildlife enforcement officer, hunter education instructor, state park naturalist and operator of a raptor rescue service, said conservation and protection of wildlife and habitat have always been top priorities.

"But we just don't see in this situation any fact-based scientific reason for the agency to keep the area closed in those months," Essman said earlier this week. "The elk are in good condition inside and outside the closure area, and many are extremely well acclimated to vehicles."

She said there is no hunting in those months in the closure area, and before the closure, recreationists drove on Green Dot roads to watch wildlife, picnic and look at wildflowers spring up in April.

Essman said the 109 elk affixed with radio signal collars inside the closure area for the study were later found to be in the same condition as those outside the closure lands.

She said the study points more to the Colockum elk herd moving in the closure months in response to the availability of grazing areas and the greening up of grasses, not vehicle or other human disturbance.

Along with other state data, she said this strongly suggests that the closure has little to no influence on elk movement.

## Concerns

Essman said recreation related to visitors to state wildlife areas is a major part of the county and state's economy: According to state figures, hunters, anglers and wildlife watchers support 60,250 jobs in the state and generate \$4.5 billion in business annually for the state's economy.

She's concerned more closures of motorized public access to state wildlife lands are in the works that are not justified.

Essman, who also leads birding field trips for Kittitas Audubon and teaches at a local school district's fifth-grade outdoor camp, said more than 1,000 elk have been grazing at different times next to Vantage Highway and Interstate 90 in January outside the closure area, seeming to indicate they are not disturbed by vehicles whatsoever.

"They were even seen bedding down in an I-90 median," Essman said. She added that the wildlife department had to use a helicopter to herd elk off the I-90 freeway in January.

Essman said she's pored over the details of the study and it doesn't give credence that vehicles are the main factor in winter disturbance and movement of the Colockum herd.

Essman said it was suggested during the Jan. 7 meeting that the wildlife department keep the area open for vehicle use for one Feb. 1-April 30 period and closely monitor the movement and condition of the elk.

She said agency officials said they believed that shouldn't be done.

"So, in essence, the state began closing the area first, without any factual basis, then did the study in what looks like trying to justify closures," Essman said.

Another suggestion to the state is that it closely monitor the condition of elk just outside the closure area and compare.

The elk study indicated the highest number of vehicles entering the area on a specific day when it is open for motorized vehicles was 25.

"That doesn't establish in my mind that that number of vehicles per day are causing unreasonable disturbance to the elk," she said.

### **Goal of study**

The study's objectives were to quantify movement of Colockum elk; see how the core area and Parke Creek elk sub-herds are connected; explore the effects of disturbance, weather and habitat on elk movement and distribution; estimate survival, productivity and the condition of elk cows; and evaluate whether the Whisky Dick winter access closure has management value, according to a January report.

### **Closure in sixth year**

The seasonal closures began in 2008, and the elk behavior study followed. Livingston said the study's data indicates that elk used areas near roads more in the closure area than in the open areas to the north.

"In fact, GPS data show they used those areas more in each successive month of the closure," Livingston said, "but widened their distance in May back to the pre-closure (January) levels. We did not see this occur for elk GPS points in the portion of the winter range open to motor vehicle use."

These trends, Livingston said, contradict the notion that elk become acclimated to vehicles.

When asked about data in the more than three-year-old study indicating the search for food moved elk more than motor vehicles, Livingston said the findings are not presenting an either-or situation in elk movement but a mix of reasons.

"Elk may shift their range to seek food, avoid human activity, or both," said Livingston, who also is a wildlife biologist.

The study found that in 2009 elk left the closure area immediately after the end of the winter closure on May 1, Livingston said. In 2010 and 2011 they left a few weeks before the end of the closure period, perhaps to find food.

"We don't know whether they would have left sooner without the road closure in place, but we do know that human disturbances prompt elk to seek more secure locations," he said.

The state Fish and Wildlife Department purchased the wildlife area land to provide safe, wintering habitat for big game, including elk, and to keep elk from wandering into farms and ranches.

Temporary closures of critical big game winter ranges to motorized vehicles occur in virtually every Western state, Livingston said, and this kind of protection of wildlife is nothing new.

He added that past population survey results indicated the Colockum elk herd was below its population growth objective and wildlife biologists' objectives for bull ratios and calf ratios.

## **Trust issue**

Essman countered by saying the Colockum herd exceeded the population goal of 4,500 elk in 2012.

She said the wildlife agency acknowledges that 89 percent of the breeding elk cows examined most recently were found to be pregnant “indicating that the bull-to-cow ratio must be far better than WDFW has admitted to.”

“There is a huge trust issue going on here,” Essman said. “We don’t think the WDFW is being transparent about this issue.”

### County commissioners to hear about study

Kittitas County commissioners have invited state Fish and Wildlife Department officials to make a presentation about the Colockum elk herd study during a public study session on Monday.

The presentation will come during weekly meetings with county Public Works and Community Development Services department staffs that start at 1:30 p.m. Monday in Room 109 at the courthouse in Ellensburg.

Commission Chairman Obie O’Brien said the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club has informed commissioners individually about its concerns with the east county wildlife area closures, and commissioners want to hear directly from wildlife officials on the issue.

### Bill calls for science-based decisions, study questioned

A bill before the state House of Representatives in Olympia calls for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife to first show the public how it uses science before making major policy changes or agency rules.

The bill requires WDFW to show its sources of scientific information used to make the changes, including peer-reviewed literature or others. This information must be available on the agency’s website.

Some outdoor groups have concerns with the agency’s scientific basis for wildlife management decisions related to wolves and public access to state lands. The bill is HB 1112.

Jim Huckabay, vice president of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, said the Colockum elk herd study by the WDFW was well managed and carried out, and resulted in good data.

But he questioned the conclusion by some WDFW officials that the study supports keeping seasonal vehicle access closed east of Ellensburg on state wildlife lands.

“I’ve looked at the study, and the data doesn’t support that conclusion,” said Huckabay, a retired Central Washington University geography and land studies professor who has done research on management of wildlife conflicts involving private landowners, wildlife agencies and interest groups.

Huckabay said he believes the WDFW, in the six years of the wildlife land access closure, hasn't adequately come back to the public and outdoors groups to share its policy directions and to ask for wider public input and advice on the issue before making decisions.

WDFW officials said they would do this along with the closure, Huckabay said, and haven't followed through on that commitment.

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## Where it goes from here

State Fish and Wildlife Department Region 3 Director Mike Livingston said any recommendation to make the Whisky Dick Wildlife Area closure permanent for three months a year must undergo scrutiny by a 16-member advisory group that's working on the Naneum Ridge to Columbia River Recreation Plan.

The Whisky Dick lands are part of the more than 230,000 acres of state wildlife and Department of Natural Resource lands in Kittitas and Chelan counties that are being examined to determine what level and kinds of recreation they can reasonably support in light of the terrain, habitat and wildlife.

Later this year, several alternatives for management of recreation in the area will be developed, Livingston said, and the preferred alternative will next be assessed through the State Environmental Policy Act review process. After that, the WDFW director will make the final decision.