

https://www.dailyrecordnews.com/paywall/news/county-opposes-yearly-closures/article_b3b849d2-8cd4-11e2-af3f-0019bb2963f4.html

FEATURED

County opposes yearly closures

Commissioners call for alternate management for elk herds

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer

Mar 14, 2013



Part of the Colockum elk herd is photographed by state wildlife officials northeast of Ellensburg. The herd is the focus of an annual, three-month closure to motorized vehicles to protect them from disturbance.

Contributed

Kittitas County commissioners oppose closing wildlife lands east of Ellensburg to motorized access from Feb. 1 through April 30 each year.

"We are very interested in pursuing alternate strategies that would avoid simply closing more roads and limiting access without solid, scientific evidence," wrote Commissioners Obie O'Brien, Gary Berndt and Paul Jewell in a letter approved Monday.

The state wildlife lands in the Whisky Dick/Skookumchuck/Quilomene area about 18 miles northeast of Ellensburg are managed by the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and are the winter range for the Colockum elk herd.

Wildlife agency officials are proposing to make the winter vehicle closure permanent to reduce human-generated disturbances to the wintering elk herd.

The temporary seasonal closures cover about 44,000 acres and began in 2008. They must be reinstated each year after an evaluation of the elk herd.

The wildlife agency in a Jan. 7 meeting in Ellensburg discussed results of an elk behavior study it said supports making the seasonal closure permanent.

The Kittitas County Field and Stream Club and the Kittitas County Chamber of Commerce say the study's data doesn't support a conclusion that a permanent seasonal closure is needed. The groups contend other information indicates vehicles are not disturbing wintering elk.

The two organizations oppose a permanent, seasonal closure and plans to close other road accesses to state lands popular with recreationists indicating the huge draw the lands have to recreationists and their support of the county's economy.

State wildlife officials and researchers presented the elk study information to county commissioners at a Feb. 25 meeting. Wildlife officials have said the closures reduce disturbances to the elk so they can conserve energy at times when they are sometimes down to 3 to 5 percent body fat.

The state also has said there have been fewer claims of property damage from elk made by nearby rural landowners since the closures have gone into effect, indicating the elk for the most part are staying in the closure area.

No effects

In the letter to WDFW Regional Director Mike Livingston, county commissioners said they were concerned with the limitations of the elk study. They pointed out the study reflects only what's happening to elk after the closure and doesn't present data about elk behavior without the seasonal closure.

Commissioners said they see a trend occurring in more closures of access to federal and state lands. They said the use of state and federal lands, making up more than 70 percent of the county, is part of the lifestyle of the community and important to local economies.

Livingston, contacted earlier this week, said the commissioners' letter and other comments from local governments and the public will go to the citizen advisory committee that's helping the WDFW and the state Department of Natural Resources to form the Naneum Ridge to Columbia River Recreation Plan.

The recommendation for a permanent closure will come before the committee, he said, and the committee, in turn, will make recommendations to the two state agencies who make the final decision.

Recreation plan meeting

What: Next meeting of the Naneum Ridge to Columbia River Recreation Plan's citizen and landowner advisory committee.

When: 6-9 p.m. March 20

Where: Southeast regional offices of the state Department of Natural Resources, Bowers Field, north of Ellensburg.