

Locally-led Solutions to Elk Problems in Kittitas County



What happens when a community's elk population grows considerably in a short period of time... and you have one elk for every two people in the local population? Controversy, arguments, and finger pointing! In the early 1960's the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) began building a fence to isolate elk from automobiles on the newly-built I-90 roadway in Kittitas County. For thirty years the fence worked quite well and both the animals and humans had safe space.

However, in the past 10 years the elk population has grown and expanded their range to include resident populations "below the elk fence." "In the mid 1980s there were no resident elk on the Westside of the Kittitas Valley and only the occasional migratory elk found its way around the 8' elk fence onto private shrub steppe lands," says Dave Duncan, local

rancher. The numbers of resident elk on our ranch has gradually increased even with the installation of elk return-gates. We had over 45 calves born

here this year. There are other areas in our county where the resident elk are even more numerous." These elk have caused major economic losses to occur. Paying damage claims and dealing with elk complaints created ill-will between WDFW and private landowners.

In 2002, Jeff Tayer, Region 3 Director for WDFW and Dave Duncan created the Big Game Management Roundtable – initially a small focus group to address the elk problems as they occurred. Today, more than 50 stakeholders convene monthly in a consensus-based process to create local solutions to the large elk problems in Kittitas County. Roundtable stakeholders include Kittitas Audubon Society, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, farmers and ranchers, Yakama Indian Nation, Washington Bowhunters, Kittitas Field & Stream Club, local realtors, Kittitas County Conservation District, WA Department of Natural Resources, Kittitas

Environmental Education Network, WA Department of Fish & Wildlife, Kittitas County Cattlemen's Association, Boise Cascade, Inc., U.S. Forest Service, Master Hunters, WSU Extension, U.S. Army, Solar \$, and Central Washington University.

Resolving Conflicts: When it comes to solving community problems – like too many elk and humans sharing space, consideration needs to be given to "what are the alternatives to collaborative decision making?" The most usual and popular is litigation, the end result of which usually only addresses one side of a problem. When we talk of collaboration, we are also talking accommodation, the art of compromise. "In our case, litigation to solve elk depredation could conceivably result in killing all depredating elk," says Joe Meuchel, Kittitas Audubon Society. Not even the most put-upon landowner would like to see that occur, if any other sensible solutions could be found. So, it has been gratifying to work with a diverse group to come up with solutions which everyone can sign off on."

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.

Working committees

include: land & people management, mapping & elk control, and education & information. There is also a steering committee to guide and oversee the working committees and develop long term focus for the BGMR. “Specific strategies are being developed to make depredation areas less attractive to elk and make other areas, natural intended habitat, more attractive to elk,” says Jeff Tayer, WDFW. “Our short-term actions include, hotspot hunts, herding & hazing, GIS mapping, and private land fence repair.”

Collecting Existing Data: A great deal of historical information is available to facilitate this process, including: location of elk depredation complaints and problem areas; slope of the land & watering sources; edge, roads and buffered distances; winter elk survey results; and telemetry points. This information is being overlaid to create a comprehensive map. From the assimilation of available data and GIS mapping, BGMR stakeholders will identify problem areas, areas that elk prefer, and areas not-preferred.

This will help determine the root causes of elk re-distribution.

Public Education: Ongoing education efforts include improving working relationships between private landowners and public land managers; informing community members of the unintended consequences of harboring, feeding, and habituating big game animals; and helping the community to understand and support the concept that proper management of wildlife is a community responsibility. This educational campaign includes community flyers, columns in the local newspaper, and one-on-one visits between BGMR stakeholders and local residents.

“The BGMR participants have pulled together and defined suspected causes and their effect on elk depredation, says Dave Duncan. “We are committed to gathering and collating all of the known information and performing the specific studies necessary to form long term strategies. The community is beginning to realize that it is our collective problem, not a WDFW problem.”

For more information, contact Jeff Tayer, Regional Director, WA Department of Fish & Wildlife at 509/750-5851, Email: tayerjit@dfw.wa.gov; or Dave Duncan, local rancher at 509/962-1062, Email: duncan@eburg.com

BGMR Steering Committee Survey

(Survey conducted by the CRM program)

What do you believe is the best thing that has happened as a result of this process?

- People coming together, developing trust and a mutual idea of the problems and need for resolution.
- Open communication and increasing trust between all stakeholders.
- A diverse group of people working collaboratively and seeking solutions to the elk problems.
- Stakeholders have been continuing to discuss problems and to look for solutions.
- People are talking; trust is developing.
- All parties are talking and compiling information so a true picture of the issue is being presented.

