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TUESDAY



LOCAL NEWS

Published: Sunday, January 28, 2007

Tribes hope to save elk herd

Stillaguamish, Tulalips join effort to relocate problem elk

By Krista J. Kapralos / Herald Writer

ACME, WHATCOM COUNTY - Men in chest-high rubber waders clamber up the side of a tarp-lined pen.

They shout and swat, hoot and holler - anything to get the six elk in the pen to move toward a narrow chute. It's the elk's only way out.

Each time an elk steps into the chute, the walls close in to keep the animal from moving. The surprised elk squeal.

The men, wildlife managers from local Indian tribes, fit each animal with a radio collar and then herd it onto a trailer.

It was moving day for these members of the Nooksack elk herd, who have been chewing their unwelcome way through cornfields in Acme.

Tribes from around the region want to move about 45 cows, bulls and calves before the state, pressured by complaints from farmers, lets hunters cull the herd.

"The tribes would like to give all these animals a chance," Stillaguamish Tribe Chairman Shawn Yannity said.

The tribes say their culture will suffer without vibrant elk herds. They want to move the elk that are so troublesome to farmers to an area where they can roam between Snohomish and Skagit counties.

They also want the state's herds to grow so they can hunt the elk and use the meat, bones and hides for ceremonies and sustenance.

A hunt this year would undermine the whole point of a recent elk relocation program that strengthened the herd, said Todd Wilbur, chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission's Inter-Tribal Wildlife Committee.

The Stillaguamish, Tulalip, Upper Skagit, Swinomish and Lummi tribes are joining the effort.

It's not the hunting that concerns the tribes.

In fact, tribal leaders hope the Nooksack Elk Herd will soon be large enough to sustain itself through a hunting season, Wilbur said.

When hunting does occur, tribal leaders want it to happen in a way that retains the animal's dignity - not on an open cornfield.

A growing herd

The Nooksack Herd expanded two years ago when state and tribal wildlife managers captured about 100 elk from the



Kevin Nortz / The Herald (click to enlarge)
Field technicians (from left) Tim Shelton, Scott Schuyler and Larry Peterson herd captured elk earlier this month in Acme, east of Bellingham.

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THURSDAY



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Mount St. Helens Herd and added them to the Nooksack Herd.

The herd shrank from 1,700 elk in the early 1980s to about 350 two years ago. The state budgeted more than \$150,000 for the move, with more than \$650,000 set aside for future herd maintenance.

Moving one live elk costs about \$1,000, said Dave Ware, game manager for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. Costs for continued management of the Nooksack herd hovered near the \$1 million mark.

Since the relocation, the Nooksack herd has grown to more than 700, Wilbur said.

The population boom has caused the elk to, well, do what elk do. More than 75 Nooksack elk have split off to form a satellite herd.

That group often wanders into Acme farmland, where the elk eat crops.

Elk have always been a problem, dairy farmer Jeff Rainey said. Farmers are used to living with about 30 elk nibbling their profits, but more freeloaders are joining the Acme herd all the time, he said.

"They're a real pain," said Bruce Rothenbuhler, another farmer who owns land that Rainey leases.

The animals trample fences and take farmers away from their daily chores, Rothenbuhler said.

Rainey often fires a shotgun into the clouds to scare the elk away or runs them off with his four-wheeler.

The corn he grows feeds his 1,000 dairy cows. "That crop to me is worth several hundred thousand dollars," he said. "I just can't have them destroy it. That's my livelihood."

Moving the elk

Tribal leaders understand, and they want to help. Helping the farmers can also help them preserve tribal culture.

"My tribe's villages were in the heart of elk country," Upper Skagit Natural Resources Manager Scott Schuyler said. "It's important that the herd maintains viability for future generations."

Together, the tribes have spent about \$1 million on elk projects over the past five years, Wilbur said.

In this project, wildlife managers are using passive traps to avoid drugging the elk, Wilbur said. They've already brought a dozen to their new home, an area north of Darrington in the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

The passive trap dramatically reduces the stress of capture on an animal.

Wildlife managers, watching via cameras, close the trap door remotely when elk are lured inside by the smell from a bin of fresh apples.

Trapping this way takes time.

The Upper Skagit tribe set a trap near Rainey's farm in December, but the elk avoided it for weeks. Finally, about two weeks ago, they were able to get six elk cows trapped, collared and moved.

In three or four years, the tribes envision a herd of about 300 elk in the area north of Darrington.

"We're targeting family groups and we're taking cows that are pregnant," Wilbur said.

Relocation challenges

The tribes moved six Nooksack elk to the Rockport area early last year, but the rest of the herd retreated into the mountains before more could be moved, Wilbur said.

It could take three or four years to capture and move as many elk as necessary.

Landowners agreed to allow the tribes to trap and move the elk this season, state Department of Fish and Wildlife Captain Bill Hebner said.

But the farmers haven't agreed to endure heightened crop damage for the next several years.

It's possible that they'll reconsider, Hebner said. If they don't, the state must take action and open a hunt.

"We expect that after our winter trapping efforts that we'll follow this up with a harvest of some type," Hebner said. "A damage hunt."

State officials say trapping and relocating elk is usually considered an "absolute last resort," Hebner said.

"You often trap them and move them to another area, where they'll continue to cause problems," he said. "We are giving it a try in this case, at the tribes' request."

Reporter Krista J. Kapralos: 425-339-3422 or kkapralos@heraldnet.com >> kkapralos@heraldnet.com.

Washington's elk

There are two types of elk in Washington state: Roosevelt elk (also known as Olympic elk) are native to the Pacific Northwest. Rocky Mountain elk were transplanted from Yellowstone National Park in the early 1900s.

- Elk habitat includes closed-canopy forest and grassland, meadows or clear-cut areas.
- Elk herds split during the winter, spring and summer, when cows and calves stay separate from the bulls. Breeding is in the fall.
- Tribal hunters take less than 1 percent of the annual deer and elk hunt. More deer and elk are killed by vehicles



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than by tribal hunters.

- There are 10 elk herds in Washington state. The largest is the Mount St. Helens Elk Herd, with more than 12,000 animals.

Sources: Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife, Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission.

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