



A bull elk weighs up to about 700 pounds and spends much of its time browsing for food. *Photos: D. Preston*



Development in the Sequim area is forcing the area's iconic elk herd to be moved.



Sequim farmer Gary Smith has experienced significant crop damage caused by elk.

# Treaty Tribes Work To Protect, Enhance Elk Populations

## Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe Says Moving Sequim Herd Best Solution For Elk, People

Moving the Sequim elk herd is the best way to save it from a slow death by development and help local farmers at the same time. That’s the conclusion the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribal Council reached at its January meeting.

“It’s disappointing that the city government and developers aren’t interested in being sensitive or responsible to wildlife needs,” said Ron Allen, tribal chairman for the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe. “This was not a comforting decision to make, but nobody else is stepping up to tackle this problem and we find ourselves taking the lead.”

“It’s clear from our review that the city of Sequim’s urban growth plan does not accommodate elk,” said Scott Chitwood, natural resources director for the tribe.

Sequim’s identity is linked to the iconic elk as evidenced by two metal bull elk sculptures at either end of the city limits on Highway 101. But elk have been squeezed out of most of their current range by rapid residential development within the city corridor. The herd rarely strays from a small area of farms north of town where they are causing extensive crop damage. “There’s nowhere for them to go,” said Jeremy Sage, wildlife biologist for the Point No Point Treaty Council. The treaty council is a natural resource management organization serving the Jamestown S’Klallam and Port Gamble S’Klallam tribes.

The tribal recommendation for moving the herd is supported by the majority of representatives who make up the Dungeness Elk Working Team, which consists of the tribe, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), Clallam County, City of Sequim, Olympic National Forest and local landowners.

The transfer recommendation was based on the herd’s behavior and an examination of development trends in the valley for the past several years. “Most of this year’s elk calves were born around farmer’s fields to the north of the city rather than in the forests farther south, as they had traditionally been in years past,” said Sage. “In their present state, they have very little experience with predators like cougars and little knowledge of what a forest is like. That makes the safety of the fields all the more attractive to them.”

The farmers are rarely fully compensated for elk damage by the state, which allows compensation if they allow hunting on their property. “That just drives farmers closer to subdividing and selling their land,” said Sage.

Sequim farmer Gary Smith, who supports moving the herd, has experienced significant crop damage from elk. Historically, he only saw the elk in his fields in late summer and then incidentally throughout the winter. Each spring, the elk used to move south across the increasingly congested Highway 101 to reach a forest where calves were born. At that time, damage to farmer’s crops was minor.

But, over the past 18 months, the herd’s behavior changed. Most of the elk stayed in farmers’ fields and, in Smith’s case, ate a hybrid cauliflower seed crop valued at \$25,000 and caused another \$24,000 in damage to other crops “Farming is marginal as it is. Those seed crops are what keep us viable,” said Smith.

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Efforts to scare the elk away have failed. “The elk have figured out they can eat and reproduce well without fear of predators or cars here. This new behavior isn’t likely to change now,” said Smith. “As development continues, using hunting to control the size of the herd will become less of an option because of safety concerns.”

The best place to relocate the herd has yet to be determined. A

way to pay for the transfer must be found and several assessments will be necessary to find the most appropriate spot.

“We’re trying to find a reasonable and affordable solution to this clash of nature and a growing society. We have to find room in our society for the elk too,” said Allen. – *D. Preston*

## Puyallup Tribe Works To Protect Elk Winter Habitat

Every winter a 1,200 head elk herd migrates from upper alpine areas around Mt. Rainier National Park and Mt. Adams to the Cowlitz River valley in search of food around the town of Packwood.

“Habitat in the upper alpine areas, such as the national park and the protected wilderness areas where this herd spends the summer, is the most protected and highest quality summer habitat available,” said Barbara Moeller, wildlife biologist for the Puyallup Tribe of Indians. “Habitat outside those areas is not necessarily protected and may not be as high quality from year to year because forest management limits available food.”

Protecting and improving winter habitat for the south Rainier elk herd is the focus of a new effort by the tribe and the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit land conservancy organization. One of the reasons the south Rainier elk herd is not considered self-sustainable is because of limited high quality habitat. Currently the herd is declining at a regular pace. To be self-sustaining that trend needs to be reversed.

After mapping the elk herd’s winter range, the tribe and the conservation group will approach landowners in the Cowlitz Valley to see if they’re interested in selling conservation easements to protect the herd. Conservation easements are deed restrictions landowners voluntarily place on their properties to protect natural resources.

“Elks’ just use the habitat like they always have if they can get to it. The maps will show us the elk’s favorite places during the winter,” said Moeller. “The only way to make sure this elk herd is strong is for private landowners to have a real hand in their conservation. Elk need good habitat.”



Barbara Moeller, wildlife biologist with the Puyallup Tribe, listens for a radio signal that helps her track the location of elk wintering in the Cowlitz River watershed.

*Photo: E. O’Connell*

The tribe is using radio telemetry data collected over several years to draw the habitat usage maps for the herd. The tribe keeps as many as 30 animals fitted with radio collars, allowing Moeller to gather monthly data on their movements. “Because we collect this data on such a regular basis, we have a pretty good idea how these elk move through their habitat during the seasons,” said Moeller. That data also lets the tribe keep track of the herd’s health by tracking deaths and survival.

The radio collaring will also help the tribe develop a model that will lead to more accurate population estimates for the herd. The model, one of the first of its kind in western Washington, will allow the tribe to estimate the herd’s size and composition without having to try to actually count each animal.

“Elk depend on the quality of their habitat,” said Moeller. “Protecting habitat is the only surefire way to guarantee that the herd will be healthy in the long run.”

## Mount Rainier Elk Fast Facts

- Scientific name: *Cervus elaphus*.
- Elk are part of the same family that includes moose, caribou, mule deer, and white-tailed deer.
- A cow elk can weigh up to 500 pounds and measure 4.5 feet at the shoulder and 6.5 feet from nose to tail. A bull elk can weigh up to 700 pounds and measure 5 feet at the shoulder and 8 feet from nose to tail.
- Generally, elk eat grasses and parts of woody plants in winter; grass in the spring and fall; grass and forbs (low-growing, soft-stemmed plants) in summer.
- Body colors vary from deep copper brown to tan with a beige rump patch. An elk’s legs and necks are often darker than its body.

– *E. O’Connell*