

## **Skagit Land Trust Elk Public Policy Statement**

*January 2020*

### Elk and Skagit Land Trust

In 2001, Skagit Land Trust (the Trust) acquired Hurn Field, an iconic pasture along the Skagit River known as a prime spot to view elk. Working in cooperation with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the Trust developed a wildlife viewing pullout along SR 20 at Hurn to view the elk. In subsequent years, the Trust has acquired more land with elk habitat, and has managed a number of properties between Sedro-Woolley and Rockport for the multiple benefits of agricultural use, open space, elk habitat, salmon habitat and wildlife viewing.

In 2013, the Trust was invited by WDFW to serve on the Elk Management Working Group – a gathering of stakeholders convened to advise WDFW on the update to the North Cascades Elk Herd Management Plan. The Trust served on the working group throughout its duration, and has subsequently participated in further stakeholder and community discussions about elk, when requested.

In 2019, the Trust was invited to provide testimony to the Washington State House’s Committee on Rural Development, Agriculture and Natural Resources.

### Skagit Land Trust Elk Public Policy Principles

#### **The North Cascades Elk Herd – History & Science**

- Elk are native to the Skagit Valley. After the herd’s population was depleted by over-hunting and changing land-use patterns, it has been augmented in past decades with translocated animals, but the elk are a natural part of the Skagit ecosystem.
- The range of the North Cascades Elk Herd stretches from the Canadian border to Hwy. 2, as shown in the North Cascades Elk Herd Management Plan (WDFW, 2018).
- Elk are important culturally to the Point Elliot treaty tribes and the Trust recognizes and respects the role of these tribes as co-managers, along with WDFW, of the North Cascades Elk Herd.
- Elk are important to many residents of the Skagit, including many visitors and landowners who are drawn to the valley to see the elk and experience their role in the native ecosystem.

#### **The Elk’s Range and the Valley Floor**

- Skagit Land Trust supports the right of the elk to their full range as shown in the 2018 Management Plan, from the Canadian border to Hwy 2, including in sustainable locations on the Skagit Valley floor. We encourage solutions and partnerships with landowners and businesses who employ wildlife friendly practices.

- We are opposed to eliminating all elk from the valley floor as it is part of their natural range. There should be wildlife areas and corridors on the valley floor where elk can feed, and also travel from foothills-to-foothills and to the river and other water sources. These wildlife areas and corridors can be centered around elk-tolerant properties, such as those owned by Skagit Land Trust and wildlife supporters. These lands would provide key connectivity from the mountains to the river not just for elk, but other wildlife species as well.

### **Managing Lands For Elk and Minimizing Elk / Human Conflict**

- The Trust will continue to provide refuge areas for elk. This will decrease pressure on other private lands in the valley and ensure adequate wildlife habitat as the valley develops. We will pursue partnerships with tribes and other organizations to enhance the agricultural quality, habitat and forage potential, of some lands in Trust ownership, partly in an effort to draw the animals to wildlife-friendly lands and away from areas of conflict.
- Given Skagit County's significant areas of public land, and the successful recovery of many wildlife species, managing the interaction between wildlife and people will be a never-ending part of living and working in Skagit.
- The Trust recognizes there are issues with damage to agricultural crops, as well as road safety. The Trust farms a number of properties and knows from those who work our land, and from our neighbors, that there is loss and damage from elk.
- To help elk and humans live together, we support collaborative solutions and resources provided by the co-managers and other entities to landowners to help prevent or mitigate damage from elk. These solutions include providing crop-damage compensation and assistance with fencing elk from working agricultural lands. We also support notifying new landowners that they will be living in an area of active wildlife habitat.
- To assist with mitigating road safety issues and to help augment natural wildlife corridors, the Trust encourages the State to study and, if feasible, fund highway overpasses or other safe-crossing infrastructure along SR 20. There are similar solutions along I-90, and throughout the country that have shown real benefits for safety and wildlife habitat connectivity. The Trust will work with the state on siting structures on Trust land, if they provide optimal locations.
- The Trust currently has a moratorium on elk hunting on our property. The Trust allows hunting for other species and fishing on many properties and is not against hunting. The Trust will reconsider the moratorium if there is a working consensus on respecting the right of elk to their full range, including at least parts of the valley floor, and it is clear that hunting elk on Trust property will not harm the goal of achieving the 2018 Management Plan's population targets.