

From: Yakima County Farm Bureau

To: Washington Department Of Fish And Wildlife

Date: 1-3-20

RE: WDFW Proposed Purchase In The Wenas Valley (Hoover Ranch)

This correspondence is from the Yakima County Farm Bureau (YCFB). YCFB is a grass roots organization with 2700 members consisting of farmers and ranchers with operations both large and small as well as other folks with interest in agriculture affairs in Yakima and Klickitat Counties.

Recently our County Farm Bureau became aware of a plan by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to purchase additional real property in Yakima County.

As a matter of principle the YCFB is opposed to the State acquiring more real property. There are a number of reasons for our position. The first is that the State does not pay property tax like a private owner, rather it has agreed to contribute through Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT). PILT payments are calculated on a different and much more favorable scale (to the State) using a category called Open Open Space (OOS).

OOS affords the State a break on the calculation of the PILT amount unlike anything that a private owner is afforded. Yet, the State further reduces the amount they contribute to the various Counties by simply not abiding by the agreed amount. WDFW has shorted Yakima County more than \$360,000 for the past seven years. Currently, the Department is supposed to have made PILT payments in excess of \$500,000 but has only contributed \$140,000 in that time period. Thus when the State continues to purchase land it is removing bona fide private held lands from the tax rolls and placing them in a *nebulous* category where the assessment calculation is already lower than any other tax payer is allowed (OOS) but that it is also manipulated such that the Department decides what if any it will actually pay.

We wonder how the County would react if private land owners simply decided how much Property Tax they would pay?

Further, the amount of privately owned land as a percentage of the whole land area Yakima County encompasses amounts to less than 20%. Federal, State, Tribal and local governments hold the remaining 80 % (plus) of the County. This is a sobering statistic when one considers that property taxes pay for Schools, Law and Justice and Fire Protection as well as contributing towards roads and other services. Among the list of Government land owners, only the State makes PILT payments.

Several years ago when the Department of Natural Resources and the United States Forest Service logged their timber, they both contributed considerable amounts of money into the public schools but environmental restrictions ended the harvest of that timber. Recently there has been a minor increase in logging. Besides that exception and (State's) PILT there

are no other property based contributions toward public services other than what is collected from private citizen property tax.

To consider this in a different perspective: How long could a civilization survive if only 20% of their individuals were employed and the other 80% were slouches living off the hard work of the employed?

The second reason YCFB opposes the State acquiring more land is due to budgetary concerns. We understand that the WDFW is going to request a budget increase request for 27 million dollars from the State Legislature and that without the additional funds according to the Department, it is facing layoffs of personnel and cut backs in programs. *Any entity that pursues buying more property while it is facing significant budget shortfalls is beyond foolish.*

The third reason YCFB opposes the State acquiring more land in Yakima County is the poor management of their existing lands. A good example is the former LT Murray Ranch. WDFW acquired that property decades ago and summarily destroyed or neglected hundreds of miles of livestock fencing and thirty (30) animal watering facilities. All animals need water including wildlife but apparently WDFW disagrees. *Today there is but one functioning watering location left.*

The livestock fencing issue is important since fences are necessary for efficient livestock grazing management. The YCFB believes that the Department should reinstate domestic stock grazing as a management tool to enhance their wildlife forage quality and also generate grazing fees that can supplement PILT payments to Yakima County. Unfortunately the neglect, destruction and removal of the LT Murray fencing create a significant hurdle with respect to the re-introduction of domestic grazers because fences are a critical tool to control the domestic grazers to achieve a desired outcome with the forage, in this case to benefit wildlife.

The grazing of ranges and pastures also reduces fire danger but WDFW is not interested in that management tool. As a result of WDFW mismanaging the LT Murray there have been a number of very large and dangerous wild fires there. These fires have been so out of control that when they burned up to local neighboring orchards the heat was so intense that it killed and/or damaged green trees well inside the orchard. It is important to remember where a local jurisdiction's money for fighting fires originates: Property tax. Who has the out of control fires but pays no property tax?

What is even more disturbing about the acquisition of the LT Murray by WDFW is that we understand that in the terms of the original purchase agreement, it was stipulated that WDFW would maintain it as a multiple use property including grazing livestock. In more recent times a member of our Board tried most unsuccessfully to acquire a copy of that agreement. He even enlisted the help of a State Representative and the request was only met with claims that the document had been destroyed or lost or any other excuse available.

Finally a representative of the Department contacted our member by phone to attempt to put the matter to rest. When our Board member told the Department (again) what he was requesting, the representative brushed the whole matter aside by claiming that the original agreement had expired!

How could the Department know that a provision or entire agreement had expired if it did not have the document???

Thus far the YCFB has only contrasted the State's management of dry land. The Hoover Ranch also has land that is irrigated. As an organization of farmers, YCFB membership also knows irrigated agriculture and if anything WDFW's success with irrigated hay farming is worse than their track record with dry ranges. The YCFB's membership is also most aware that finding good qualified people with farm management skills is difficult but even at a glance, it is obvious that even if WDFW is finding such qualified individuals, the Department must not be heeding their advice.

The YCFB believes that WDFW's management of properties like the LT Murray is but a snap shot of what their other properties around the County resemble, though the location and name of the acquired ranch or farm changes, WDFW's management style does not.

A principle species that WDFW manages in Eastern Washington is the Rocky Mountain Elk (elk). This elk has proven itself very aggressive, particularly with respect to food. The degree of encroachment by elk on private land has become an epidemic in Yakima County. WDFW buys ever increasing amounts of land under the guise that doing so will help with the elk problem. If not for their poor management they might have had some success because managed grazing with livestock would increase the desirability of the saved forage for wildlife. *It is proven science!* Instead, the Department lands become an excuse for the elk to rest and hide there *but feed elsewhere*. This is because the Department refuses to manage their overgrown vegetation. The result is that the WDFW's over grown lands serve as a spring board for the elk to then trespass onto private lands where the management has produced great quantities of succulent food. Once an elk herd knows where the better food is, there is no stopping them. Simply put, this places farmers and ranchers in financial peril due to crop destruction.

The subspecies of elk that WDFW places an inordinate amount of resources upon is not even native to either Yakima County or Washington State. The fact is the Rocky Mountain Elk were transplanted to Yakima via rail road box cars in the early 1900's. The first introduction was unsuccessful but the second attempt was. By the early 1950's the Washington State legislature found it necessary to place a cap of 3000 elk for the Yakima Herd because the damage to agricultural lands and crops was so great that even more restrictions had to be imposed such as special game fencing and the acquisition of properties where WDFW then fed the elk purchased hay within a purpose built feeding station.

In 1982 the Legislative cap expired on the number of elk allowed in the Yakima herd. As a result there has been no restriction on how many elk can reside in Yakima County. A few years ago by the Department's own numbers, the Yakima herd numbered 15,000.

One should ponder that for a moment: 3000 to 15,000. Does 15,000 head of elk sound like a *reasonable* management level given that this animal is aggressive?

While it is true the Department claims to have reduced the size of the herd somewhat (11,500 head) since they made the claim that it had grown to 15,000, it also stated in another public meeting *that the Department had changed the way it counts them.*

The YCFB also believes that an introduced species that is aggressive is also an invasive species. Any other plant or animal is generally considered as such. It is only logical that if elk were hauled in on rail box cars from several States away then either they are non-native or if they are native as the Department insists, then rail road box cars must also be native.

While the introduced elk here in Yakima are referred to as the Rocky “Mountain” Elk we need to revisit that history as well. The fact is that these elk pre-settlement were in fact plains animals. The arrival of settlers drove these elk into the mountains. However, the oversized Yakima herd is now causing natural resource issues in the mountains in the western part of our county that is prompting the elk to push back down to the plains like they were accustomed to reside in the first place. There is just *one little problem* we live and farm and ranch on those plains!

The YCFB believes that when the WDFW purchases lands that they then manage improperly with an insatiable appetite for owning even more lands, depriving funds for important services through tax base erosion and also cause private land owners grief due to the Department becoming their neighbor, it should instead:

- A) Identify properties that it should not own and sell them back to private citizens thus placing them back on the tax rolls as well as restoring their productivity
- B) Stop crowding further into agricultural settings causing more disruption by buying additional land and finally
- C) Better manage the remaining land (post re-organization) so the Department’s game animals are more satisfied there and thus trespass less.

YCFB urges WDFW to not purchase the Hoover Ranch much less any other additional property in Yakima County. Instead the State should re-evaluate the ownership of land and the negative effect it has on the general economy. Finally, the YCFB believes that the State can do a much better job of managing the natural resources through the use of cooperative agreements with willing land owners while creating financial savings by not owning great expanses real property.

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