

Elk Problem Still Eats Away At Farmers

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EMPORIUM (Cameron Co.)—It depends on which side of the fence you're on. Some people like to hunt or view large majestic elk here in Pennsylvania. Others like the idea of being able to sell a full field of corn or hay or vegetables, not one half-eaten or trampled by elk. To the elk, there is no fence. They simply want to eat.

The pesky problem of elk damage for farmers began in 1913. Now, nearly 90 years later, the problem still exists. It's currently a hot issue in Cameron and Elk counties, where more than 100 people met in Emporium in October 1999 to vent some steam on the issue.

Farmers, business owners, Chamber of Commerce leaders, and Game Commission officials met to address the idea of establishing an elk viewing area for tourists.

Ironically, a similarly heated meeting took place in Emporium in October 1970 when the Cameron County Soil and Water Conservation District and the North Central Pennsylvania Economic Development District proposed a 10,000-acre elk management and tourism site in Elk and Cameron counties.

After 90 years of such meetings, there are only a few conclusions that both sides of the fence can agree on - as long as elk and agriculture exist in proximity, the problem won't go away, and on one blames the elk. They're just doing what animals in the wild do.

The idea of reintroducing elk into the commonwealth in the early 1900s might have cropped up because of guilty conscience. Or perhaps man just wanted something bigger to hunt. Whatever the reason, elk had become completely 'exterminated' from the state by 1877.

By 1910, Pennsylvanians began to realize with horror what they'd done. Gone were Pennsylvania's impressive buffalo herds, stately elk herds, fearsome eastern mountain lions, and packs of wolves.

About this same time, during the winters from 1910 to 1912, enormous herds of elk were starving to death in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The federal government decided to alleviate this problem by shipping and restocking elk in other parts of the country.

In 1913, according to 'Mammals of Pennsylvania,' published by the Pennsylvania Game Commission, Pennsylvania received its first shipment of elk - 50 elk at \$30 per head from Yellowstone National Park. Twenty-two elk from a private preserve in Monroe County were also released at that time. According to Game Commission records, 12 were released into Monroe County, 10 in Centre County, 25 in Clearfield County, and 25 in Clinton County.

The crop damage complaints started immediately, and in 1914, the first elk (five of them) were shot illegally. Property damage complaints also increased, prompting the Game Commission's Executive Director Dr. Joseph Kalbfus to say, "It seems to me that it would be well to wait a few years at least before releasing any more of these animals in the commonwealth." The commissioners listened for a few years, then released 95 more elk in 1915.

By 1923, game officials instituted the first open elk season from December 1 to the 15. Open season hunts for bulls with four points or more were held until 1921.

According to 'The Pennsylvania Game Commission: 100 years of Wildlife Conservation' by Joe Kosack, John Phillips

became a commissioner in 1905 and talked about visiting a Centre County cornfield damaged by elk. "When farmers complained, we went into Centre County and found where a band of elk had been raiding a cornfield at night and had destroyed every ear in the field by biting about two inches off the end. They seemed to like the silk."

During this time, the elk herds increased, as did the illegal harvesting by poachers and farmers. Game Commission officials refused to arrest farmers for killing elk for crop damage. They believed farmers should be compensated for their losses and took a legislative route that failed because, according to the Game Commission publication, "the legislature believed the farmers and fruit growers would submit 'exaggerated claims' and the Game Commission would be unable to prove otherwise."

By the end of the 1920s, a rough estimate of only 200 elk roamed in only Cameron and Elk counties, and the Game Commission publication states that "elk in all other release areas were gone, taken by hunters, farmers, or poachers. The commission soon decided the elk weren't worth the trouble they'd caused and were not compatible with other land uses." The commission paid little attention to the elk until the 1970 meeting in Emporium in which the Game Commission's Executive Director, Glenn Bowers, said, "A person who suffers elk damage has every right, morally and legally, to kill an elk."

Within a matter of days, farmers, who once thought they couldn't legally shoot elk for crop damage, began shooting elk. Penn State conducted the first elk census in 1971 and found only 65 animals. A brainworm epidemic took more elk. The 1974 census estimated

only 38 animals. In 1976, the Game Commission implemented a plan, along with the Bureau of Forestry, to plant grasses and other nonwoody plants to attract elk to areas cleared by timbering. Herd numbers began to increase with a 1981 herd estimate of 135 elk.

In 1982 the Game Commission decided to hold a lottery for elk hunters. Its goal was to cut the herd's numbers in half over several years, but the need for a hunt died when a total of 35 animals died that year from all causes - natural, illegal or crop damage. Techniques to track elk improved and officials began to better learn the elk's territory range and choices of food and habitat, and the agency began to consider purchasing certain lands in elk territory. From a herd average of 150 in 1980s, the herd increased to roughly 224 in 1993, possibly because of better census methods.

In 1990, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation contributed \$38,000 toward purchasing 1,660-acres of state game lands in Winslow Hill, Elk County. It contributed \$92,000 more over the following years for elk management, including the purchase of 70,000 feet of six-strand electric fence for around fields and pastures on five different properties.

But even with these efforts, the elk remain a huge problem for farmers. With planting time approaching, farmers Jeff and LuAnn Reed of Emporium expressed their concerns. "We have a big problem with elk," said LuAnn Reed.

"They opened up our round bales with the white wrappers on them and destroyed our

neighbor's fruit trees. They're just like a cow, only much worse. Their body weight is heavier and they just mow down a field. This is my property, and I don't need to feed them. The Game Commission keeps moving the elk and into bigger farming areas. They've been seen in the Jersey Shore area where Doeblers has its corn lots. It's just a matter of time."

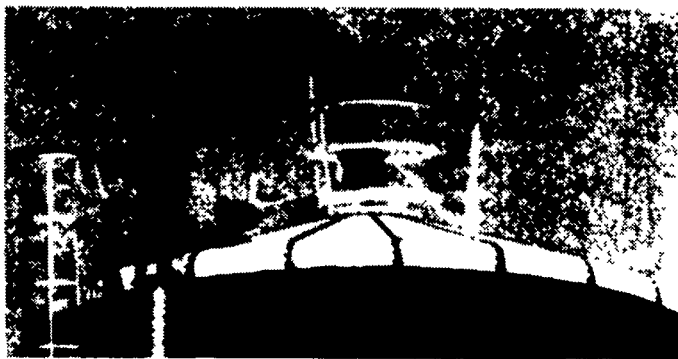
The heated debate and name slinging has entered the local newspapers and opinion columns. The Game Commission, according to newspaper reports, wants to expand the 566-elk herds' territory and increase the herd to re-establish elk hunts again. Farmers want to protect their crops, income, and property rights and often come under fire for this, as in the case of Adam Waltz, a farmer who plants 15 acres of vegetables along the Susquehanna River. Waltz has shot nine elk for damaging his vegetables, six in one week. He tried other measures first. Any elk shot for crop damage must be reported to the Game Commission within 24 hours in order to save the meat for families in need. Waltz's elk problems intensified when the Game Commission released 33 elk just three miles from his property as part of its trap-and-transfer program that started in 1996.

Pennsylvania Game Commission Press Secretary Jerry Feaser, in a letter to the Editor of the Cameron County Echo, noted, "Bottom line: we can resolve this situation if the finger-pointing stops and we all work together."

But 90 years is a long time to find a solution. l

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