

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5620

As of February 18, 2019

Title: An act relating to establishing a pilot project to test elk fencing.

Brief Description: Establishing a pilot project to test elk fencing.

Sponsors: Senator Wagoner.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks: 2/14/19.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Directs the Department of Fish and Wildlife to conduct a pilot program to test New Zealand design elk fencing in Skagit County within the range of the North Cascades elk herd.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, WATER, NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Staff: Jeff Olsen (786-7428)

Background: The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) maintains, and regularly updates, a game management plan for various game species in Washington. The North Cascade, or Nooksack, elk herd is currently being managed under a 2018 herd management plan. The Nooksack elk herd is estimated to have a population of 1,750 elk. The primary goals of the North Cascades Elk Herd Plan are to:

- preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage elk and their habitat to ensure sustainable populations;
- manage elk for a variety of recreational, educational, and other purposes including hunting, wildlife viewing, scientific study, and cultural uses by Native Americans;
- manage elk populations for a sustainable annual harvest; and
- minimize property damage and public safety risks associated with elk.

The plan identifies strategies to address challenges in managing the North Cascades elk herd including:

- reduce the average annual number of elk-vehicle collisions along State Route 20; and

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

- reduce the number of elk caused damage complaints on private lands in the North Cascades elk herd area over the next five years.

Summary of Bill: DFW must conduct a pilot project to test New Zealand design elk fencing, including materials and construction techniques, and determine the cost and effectiveness of the fence design in reducing damage to private property and agricultural lands within the range of the North Cascades elk herd. The pilot program must include at least two agricultural property owners in Skagit County that volunteer to build and test the elk fence design with property abutting State Highway 20 from highly impacted areas. DFW must report back to the natural resources committees of the Legislature by November 1, 2020, on the results of the pilot project.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Elk management is a complex issue and this pilot provides an experiment to see if this fence design is effective. Electric fences and barbed wire have not been effective at preventing agricultural damage and collisions on State Highway 20. The U.S. Forest Service has used this design effectively in Oregon, and Washington should implement this pilot to see if it can work here to prevent collisions and protect agricultural producers. While fencing is not the single answer for elk damage, it is a helpful tool in controlling an elk herd that has moved on to agricultural lands and needs to move to more suitable habitat.

OTHER: DFW supports fencing as a management tool and currently has a cost-share fencing program that depends on capital funding. This pilot project could fit in the capital budget. The bill does not contain a specific definition of New Zealand fencing. DFW is working on comprehensive elk management legislation in the other chamber and this pilot project could fit within that broader context.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Keith Wagoner, Prime Sponsor; Tom Davis, Washington Farm Bureau.

OTHER: Eric Gardner, DFW.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.