

Birkmaier Ranch  
Tom Birkmaier  
P.O. Box 472  
Enterprise, Oregon 97828

October 7, 2016

Re: Elk numbers and distribution in the Zumwalt Prairie and Chesnimnus Areas

Dear Chair Findley and Members of the ODFW Commission:

My name is Tom Birkmaier, and I am a landowner, rancher, and the representative for the Zumwalt Landowner Group in Wallowa County, Oregon.

In 2002, 553 head of elk resided on the Zumwalt Prairie, a privately owned 125,000 acre area that is the southern end of the ODFW Chesnimnus Management Unit. By 2011, nearly 3500 head of elk resided on the Prairie, nearly 70% of the entire Chesnimnus elk population.

At one time, the elk preferred the canyon lands to the north, and the surrounding forested Forest Service lands to the open prairie. However, the change in use by the elk, was brought about by predation, dryer warmer winters, heavy timber encroachment, and course, unpalatable feed on the Forest Service and other un-grazed privately owned lands. By 2015, 80% of the total Chesnimnus elk population resided on 15% of the land, the Zumwalt Prairie. This was a staggering one elk for every 30 acres. As the numbers increased, soil impacts, grazing pressure, and fence damage were becoming a concern. The number of elk were also greatly hampering the restoration efforts on The Nature Conservancy.

As the elk numbers continued the rise on the Prairie, it prompted the landowners to take action. John Williams, our local OSU Extension Agent, was approached for organization and facilitation ideas. Through this effort, the Zumwalt Landowner Group was formed. This group consists of approximately 30 landowners, owning approximately 125,000 acres of private land on the Zumwalt Prairie. When our group was formed, only one ODFW Zumwalt hunt existed, consisting of only 50 tags. This was not nearly enough to keep up with the rapidly increasing elk numbers.

Through many funding projects, aided through ODFW, and a \$128,000 grant allocated to our group through the Access and Habitat Board, progress began in reducing elk conflicts with landowners. Elk hazing, funding for elk friendly fence projects, increased tag numbers and most importantly, great cooperation between ranchers, land managers, ODFW and other interested parties led to success in redistributing the elk population.

Currently, there are seven hunts consisting of 720 tags in the Zumwalt area. In addition, our local ODFW Biologist, Pat Matthews, has been allowing landowners numerous damage tags to aid in reducing elk numbers. Progress is definitely occurring, and the 2016 elk count of 2322 is down from the 2015 elk count of 3900. At this time, it appears that the elk are redistributing themselves back into their more natural habitat, which is the Forest Service land to the north. If this redistribution continues, more hunting opportunities on public land would be available, the Zumwalt Prairie landowners will have less

resource and infrastructure damage, and the elk population will be more widely distributed across the Chesnimnus Unit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Birkmaier". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Tom" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Birkmaier".

Tom Birkmaier  
Zumwalt Landowner Group