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Sportsmen urge state to impose wildlife fixes on Stemilt orchard lands

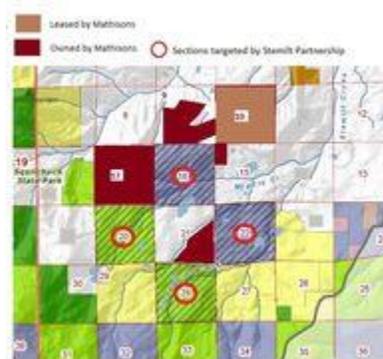
by Christine Pratt

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World photo/Christine Pratt

Some area sportsmen and orchardists worry that fences and development that Kyle Mathison has added to this land he leases from the state Department of Natural Resources narrows the wildlife "corridors" of natural vegetation, shown here in the tall green trees, that must remain open for movement of wildlife through the region.



STEMILT HILL – The Wenatchee Sportsmen’s Association made a renewed appeal Thursday for state officials to require Kyle Mathison to improve wildlife access through a 640-acre portion of his Stemilt Hill cherry orchards.

The orchards are on “Section 10” of state Department of Natural Resource (DNR) lands that Mathison has leased since Jan. 1, 2008. The land is on Stemilt Hill, about eight miles south of Wenatchee, and borders wildland meadows and ponderosa pine forests on public lands.

The approximately 260-member Association seeks to preserve public lands for wildlife protection and recreation. Association members say Mathison has violated his lease by cutting brush, thinning trees, building roads and installing fencing through canyons that they say must remain open to serve as corridors for seasonal migrations of elk.

Association members pointed out these alleged violations in October 2012 during a walk-through of the Section 10 lands with DNR officials.

Association members did a follow-up walk-through in May 2014. They observed little improvement to the wildlife corridor and hired a law firm to draft a letter of their concerns to state Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark.

At Goldmark’s urging, about a dozen men from the association, irrigation districts and area orchards met Thursday at Section 10 to again discuss their concerns with DNR regional officials. Kyle Mathison attended, as did his son West Mathison, who is president of Stemilt Growers fruit company.

“It seems like nothing is happening,” Association board member Gordy Goodwin, told Kyle Mathison, glancing at the fence through the sparsely vegetated canyon that divides Mathison’s carpet of cherry trees. “We wrote letters but nothing’s happened.”

“There isn’t an animal that can get down through these canyons,” Bud Riker, a Wenatchee Heights cherry grower, told Mathison. “This used to be a hunting paradise. Look at it today.”

Todd Welker and Randy Niessner, manager and assistant manager of the DNR’s Ellensburg-based Southeast Region, insisted that Mathison was making progress, but his improvements weren’t necessarily visible. They said imprecise wording in the lease contract has caused differing opinions of what is correct. They say they don’t see major conflicts with the lease.

West Mathison said that orchard employees often see elk passing through Section 10, and they don’t seem to be having trouble finding their way uphill in the summer or downhill in the fall.

Kyle Mathison said he wants to be a good steward of his lands and is learning how to become better. He took notes of the group’s concerns and mentioned a possibility of looking into some proposed fixes.

During the visit, he repeatedly mentioned ponderosa pine seedlings he’d planted in March to one day improve cover for elk, and plantings he’d done several years ago in an attempt to remedy some overclearing he’d done along the wildlife corridor. The letter from the Association’s lawyer to Lands Commissioner Goldmark observed that many of these earlier plantings had died, apparently from lack of care and water.

The Mathisons are in the process of expanding their orchard onto land they now own in Section 9, immediately west of their leased land in Section 10. They also have their eye on further expansion onto Section 16, immediately south of Section 9.

Section 16 is part of a commitment the DNR has made to the Stemilt Partnership, a grassroots group of orchardists, sportsmen and conservationists, to sell to the state Department of Fish and Wildlife within five years to be preserved for public recreation, wildlife and watershed protection.

After a recent failed attempt to lease Section 16 from the DNR, the Mathisons have proposed to swap other Stemilt Basin lands they own for a 130-acre portion of the 640-acre Section 16.

Partnership members seem adamantly opposed to the proposal, in part because of what they say are Mathison's unresolved lease violations in Section 10.

"My question is, 'What part of 'no' don't you understand?" Bill Stegeman, a Wenatchee orchardist and retired Entiat school teacher, told Kyle Mathison, of the family's insistence on Section 16, despite the Partnership's 5-year, ongoing effort to preserve it.

"I'm not going to debate that, because I think I'm being a good steward," Mathison replied.

West Mathison, who is also a member of the Partnership, urged further dialog on the family's proposed swap.

"We have to take this conversation to another step," he said. "It's our responsibility as the citizens here to create that collaborative discussion."