

Sheriff sued by DNR, faces possible charges for creating ‘possession tag’ for farmer who killed an elk

The sheriff told the farmer that killing elk may be an option and he wouldn't be charged, according to the suit.

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<https://www.startribune.com/dnr-sues-minnesota-sheriff-for-allowing-farmer-to-kill-elk-issuing-fake-tag-to-let-him-keep-the-meat/601451622>

A sheriff in far northwest Minnesota has been sued by state conservation officials and faces possible prosecution on allegations that he fabricated an “elk possession tag” for a farmer who killed the animal near his house.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) said in the lawsuit filed Thursday that Kittson County Sheriff Matt Vig not only concocted the document but assured Carl Christopherson — who killed the elk days before getting the tag — that he would not be charged for taking the animal without proper licensing from the state.

The suit is asking the court to bar Vig or anyone else with the Sheriff's Office from issuing these permits. It points out that the DNR alone legally controls granting the right to hunt and possess wild animals in Minnesota.

On the criminal front, the state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension said Friday that it investigated Vig and the farmer, then turned over its findings to the Kittson County Attorney's Office for consideration of charges. As of Friday afternoon, neither men have been charged, according to court records.

Given the scarcity of elk in Minnesota, winning a DNR license to hunt elk through a lottery is a coveted prize and can only be granted once in a hunter's lifetime.

The Minnesota Star Tribune reached out Friday to Vig and Christopherson for their reaction to the suit and the criminal investigation.

The DNR's latest count of elk is 233, which are concentrated in three herds in northern Minnesota and included animals that roam back and forth into Manitoba. The agency issues licenses for elk hunting in the fall. Kill totals per season range from five to 20.

The DNR said in the suit that it learned in early April about the elk being shot and the sheriff “was issuing permits to take or possess elk.”

A conservation officer contacted Vig, who then wrote a detailed report and provided it to DNR. According to the report, obtained Friday by the Minnesota Star Tribune:

On Jan. 10, Christopherson complained to Vig about elk coming on his farmland east of Lancaster for years and eating his hay, beet pulp and seed crops. Christopherson said he's been constantly chasing the elk off his land, but they keep returning, the report continued.

The situation became so bad, the farmer said, he was forced to grow his alfalfa crop several miles away.

"I informed Carl that he should have the right to protect his property from animals," Vig wrote. "I told Carl that shooting an elk may be an option to protect his property from damages."

On Jan. 31, Christopherson notified Vig that he shot and killed one of about 15 elk that were in his yard eating beet pulp meant for his cattle. The farmer said another 40 elk were munching on hay bales.

"Carl said he was frustrated and upset," Vig wrote. "He grabbed his .223 rifle, opened up his kitchen window and shot one of several elk that were walking by his house. He shot the elk in the head, which died on impact."

Vig wrote that he told Christopherson he could keep the elk and process it without concern of being charged with a crime.

On Feb. 3, Vig's report disclosed, he gave Christopherson what he labeled an "elk possession tag" allowing him to keep the venison. Full-grown elk in Minnesota can reach weights nearing a half-ton.

The suit said the DNR is turning to the court for a resolution because of ongoing tension between the DNR and Vig "on the question of whether [Vig and the Sheriff's Office] possess the authority to issue permits for the taking or possession of elk and other wild animals."

Minnesota law allows for farmers to receive financial compensation from the Department of Agriculture for crop or fence damage caused by wild elk.