

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
2017 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) operates under a dual mandate from the Legislature to: 1) protect and enhance fish and wildlife and their habitats, and 2) provide sustainable, fish- and wildlife-related recreational and commercial opportunities.

Simcoe Mountains Acquisition: WDFW and the Central and Eastern Klickitat Conservation Districts continue to partner in the acquisition and management of forestlands in the Simcoe Mountains to protect fish and wildlife habitat, maintain grazing and forestry, and provide public walk-in recreation access. To date we have acquired over 4,000 acres with funding from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) over the course of 3 Phases of a larger plan that would acquire up to 18,000 acres. The Fish and Wildlife Commission recently approved purchase of Phase 4, an additional 1,154 acres that is expected to close by the end of the year.

Shrubsteppe Conservation: WDFW private lands biologists continue working with farmers enrolled in the State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program to develop shrubsteppe habitat through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Farmers have enrolled over 93,000 acres in SAFE within the sage-grouse range in Douglas, Lincoln, and Grant counties. WDFW is working with Foster Creek Conservation District on potential conservation easements funded by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program. WDFW, NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are continuing work on a Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA) with a Douglas County landowner. The individual CCAA will cover the landowner's property and land leased from other private landowners, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR). A template CCAA for multiple landowners is on hold pending completion of the individual CCAA and lessons learned. Landowners are starting to enroll in the Douglas County Multi-Species General Conservation Plan (MSGCP) administered by Foster Creek CD to provide regulatory predictability for landowners in exchange for implementing management that promotes recovery of sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, Washington ground squirrel, and pygmy rabbit.

Species Periodic Status Reviews: WDFW periodically reviews the status of protected species in the state and makes recommendations that are available for public review to list, downlist, or delist for Fish and Wildlife Commission approval. In the last year status reviews were completed for 13 species. Through December 2018, reviews are scheduled for Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, pygmy rabbit, sea otter, common loon, gray whale, grizzly bear, ferruginous hawk, humpback whale, Oregon silverspot, mardon skipper, vesper sparrow, and northern leopard frog. The draft reviews are available online at http://wdfw.wa.gov/conservation/endangered/status_review/.

Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP): WDFW habitat biologists across the state are providing information about fish and wildlife needs for consideration by local watershed groups. WDFW serves on the Statewide Technical Panel to provide guidance to local groups in this collaborative process that relies on incentive-based practices for protecting critical areas.

Hydraulic Project Approval (HPA) changes: The 2017 Legislature approved changes to the Fish Habitat Enhancement Project statute (RCW 77.55.181) to make it easier for conservation districts and others to implement projects that benefit fish. The changes include marine shoreline restoration projects, such as the removal of shoreline armoring, docks, or other human-made structures. WDFW wants to clarify the notification process for local governments to comment on public health and safety effects of these projects. The proposal also exempts permitted restoration from application fees.

Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) Riparian update: WDFW continues work on updates to the PHS Riparian recommendations. The updated guidance will include two volumes: (1) Synthesis of the Science, (2) Management Recommendations. Blind peer review of Vol. 1 is largely completed. State agencies and tribal

co-managers have completed review of Vol. 2 which is expected to go out for full public review in December 2017. The final two-volume document is anticipated to be approved by WDFW the first quarter of 2018. Site potential tree height (SPTH) will be used to define the riparian area. In the Columbia Plateau a more site-specific method than SPTH will be recommended. The guidelines recommend local governments provide for No Net Loss of ecological functions within 1 SPTH (0.6 SPTH for non-fish bearing streams) within forested areas. For forest practices, the existing Forest Practices rules are recommended. For agriculture areas participating in the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP), the recommendations will refer to the locally-produced and approved VSP work plan.

2017-19 Operating Budget Proviso: The Legislature directed WDFW to use an outside consultant to evaluate and implement efficiencies to operations and management practices and to develop a plan for balancing the budget. This proviso directs WDFW to conduct a zero-based budget review to submit with its 2019-21 biennial budget request. In September 2017, the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted a Strategic Plan for the 2017-19 biennium that simply retains WDFW's overarching goals with the only "initiative" as implementation of the proviso. The 2017-19 Strategic Plan can be found at http://wdfw.wa.gov/about/strategic_plan/.

Wolves: Although 2017 wolf population surveys won't be finalized for an annual report to USFWS until early 2018, Washington has at least 115 wolves in 20 wolf packs with a total of 10 successful breeding pairs, reflecting continued population growth of the state endangered species. During 2017, despite non-lethal efforts including range riders, two packs that were involved in confirmed wolf kills of livestock were targeted for lethal removal of some wolves, following the protocol agreed upon by the Wolf Advisory Group (WAG). Two wolves were lethally removed from the Smackout Pack in Stevens County and one wolf was removed from the Sherman Pack in Ferry County. WDFW staff worked with Washington Department of Agriculture to implement 2017 legislation to fund nonlethal deterrence activity; submitted a USFWS grant proposal to fund non-lethal deterrence and outreach activities to support wolf recovery; and developed amendments to the Washington Administrative Code to improve and clarify the process for compensating livestock producers for wolf depredation loss. See more information at http://wdfw.wa.gov/conservation/gray_wolf/.

Livestock grazing on WDFW Lands/Coordinated Resource Management (CRM): WDFW continues to participate in multiple CRMs around Washington. Work continues on a final Simcoe Unit property management plan, and first-year monitoring on the Teanaway Community Forest grazing leases was completed with assistance from the Department of Ecology. The CRM executive committee was invited to an interpretive event at the Wild Horse CRM, a collaboration between WDFW, Puget Sound Energy, DNR, and a local producer. WDFW is also developing internal guidelines for management of wolves and livestock on WDFW-managed lands. WDFW, USFWS, Audubon Washington, North Yakima CD, and a group of private landowners have started conversations about wildfire issues between the Yakima Training Center and Hanford, which may evolve into creating a new CRM group.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): In December 2016, NRCS awarded \$1.3 million through the RCPP to WDFW to partner with DNR, State Conservation Commission (SCC), and eight conservation districts to provide technical and financial assistance to small forest landowners in SW Washington. Conservation District and DNR foresters would deliver the program to producers. Technical assistance relies heavily on match funding from the SCC and DNR that would be included in a state capital budget. It will be critical to work with legislators to convey the importance of match funding for this and other RCPP projects.