



Washington
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Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife 2021 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts



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The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is the state agency tasked with preserving, protecting and perpetuating fish, wildlife, and ecosystems, while providing sustainable fishing and hunting opportunities.

WDFW Director: It's been a whirlwind, including a global pandemic, but Kelly Susewind is enthusiastically entering his third year as director at WDFW, after 28 years at the Washington Department of Ecology. A lifelong outdoorsman and longtime resident of Washington, Susewind took advantage of the natural resources where he grew up in Grays Harbor County, hunting Roosevelt elk, fishing for salmon and digging razor clams. He now oversees 1,950 employees throughout the state in their mission of conserving fish and wildlife and providing sustainable recreational and commercial opportunities. Under Susewind's leadership, the Department has successfully transitioned to mostly working remotely; embraced new forms of technology to accomplish goals and objectives; as well as increased efforts to be good stewards of WDFW-managed lands, as record numbers of people get outside during this uncertain time to enjoy public lands and outdoor recreation.

Southern Resident Killer Whale (SRKW) Recovery Progress: The current population estimate of SRKW stands at 73. One calf was added to the SRKW population in 2021, and at least three late-term pregnancies were observed in J-Pod in late-summer. WDFW began issuing commercial whale watching licenses in 2021, after some adjustments to the license structure were made in the spring legislative session via ESB 5330. Under the new licensing program, WDFW initiated a process wherein whales designated 'vulnerable' receive extra protections, and this process was triggered three times: upon the rapid deterioration and now presumed death of K21 in late July, upon the assessment that two-year-old J56 is in poor body condition for her age, and upon news of the three late-stage pregnancies. In 2021, WDFW received a NOAA species recovery grant and state funding that enabled a permanent killer whale policy lead position at the agency and funded monitoring efforts to assess effectiveness of vessel rules in protecting SRKW. With additional funding, the Department is coordinating with tribes to advance assessments of pinniped population size and diets. To provide more prey for SRKW, WDFW worked with tribes and NOAA to set supportive fishing seasons, and the agency received \$11 million to produce more than 26 million additional smolts. WDFW thanks the conservation districts for leading the fourth annual Orca Recovery Day - October 16, 2021. Additional information on Southern Resident killer whale recovery efforts is included in other sections of this report. More information at:

<https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/at-risk/species-recovery/orca> and <https://wdfw.medium.com/help-protect-southern-resident-killer-whales-this-orca-recovery-day-oct-17-aaf6ff208776>

Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP): During 2020-21, WDFW's VSP efforts were focused primarily on reviewing 25 of the 27 VSP-participating counties' 5-year implementation reports. In these reports, each VSP Work Group provided a comprehensive self-assessment of their progress towards meeting the goals and benchmarks established in their county's VSP Work Plan for protecting and enhancing critical areas where agricultural activities occur. With input from regional Habitat Program biologists, WDFW headquarters staff provided written assessments for each county's report as part of the VSP Statewide Technical Panel. Staff also participated in follow-up meetings as requested with a number of county VSP Coordinators to discuss our written comments in more detail. At the local level, WDFW regional staff continued to provide technical assistance to county Work Groups with their VSP implementation efforts. Finally, Habitat Program Science Division staff delivered High Resolution Change Detection (HRCDD) data and analysis for 11 of the VSP-participating counties through at least 2017. We expect to complete HRCDD analysis through 2019 for all those counties by the end of this calendar year.



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Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) Riparian Update: Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) Updates: WDFW published the final manuscript of *PHS Riparian Ecosystems Volume 2: Management Recommendations* in December 2020, and later replaced the manuscript with a professionally designed version. The document is available on the Department's website at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/01988>. Separately, the Department made substantial changes to its spatial data layer for two agency-designated Priority Habitats (shrubsteppe and Eastside steppe) in the online "PHS on the Web" tool in late October 2021. Habitat Program staff began outreach efforts about both the Riparian Management Recommendations and the shrubsteppe/Eastside steppe spatial layer changes in early fall 2021 and have developed new online tools for the latter, including a "Statement of Appropriate Use" and Question and Answer documents, which are available on the Department's website at https://wdfw.wa.g.vo/sites/default/files/2021-10/shrubsteppe_eastside_steppe_info.pdf.

Forests: Since 2014 when the Strategy for Managing the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife's Forests was adopted, WDFW has completed 8,040 acres of non-commercial thinning, 6,286 acres of commercial thinning, and more than 5,300 acres of prescribed burning to restore forests on wildlife areas. In 2020 WDFW completed 1,983 acres of pre-commercial thinning and 270 acres of commercial thinning. WDFW only burned 22 acres in 2020 because the spring burn season coincided with COVID-19 lockdowns and there were concerns about impacting air quality during a respiratory disease pandemic. Treatments were designed to bring forests back into their historic ranges of variability or put them on accelerated trajectories to reach either climatic or fire climax conditions. In addition to improving wildlife habitat, these treatments also make forests more resilient so that they are less vulnerable to severe wildfires or insect outbreaks in the future.

Wolves: Since 2008, Washington's wolf population has grown by an average of 26 percent per year. As of 2020, the state's minimum year-end wolf population increased by 22 percent and marked the 12th consecutive year of population growth. As of Dec. 31, 2020, WDFW and the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (CTCR) documented a minimum of 178 individuals, 29 packs, and 13 successful breeding pairs (not including CTCR breeding pairs as they were not surveyed). The CTCR considers wolves on their lands recovered and did not conduct a formal count in 2020. Because this is a minimum count, the actual number of wolves in Washington is likely higher.

The [Wolf Advisory Group](#) (WAG) unanimously adopted new language clarifying the duties and expectations for range riders during its August 2020 meeting. The updated wolf-livestock interaction protocol reflecting these changes is available [here](#).

In September 2020, Governor Jay Inslee directed WDFW to initiate a new rule making relating to wolf management with the goal of instituting practices that will avoid the repeated loss of wolves and livestock in Washington. WDFW initiated rule making to amend WAC Chapter 220-440 to address wolf-livestock conflict deterrence and filed a [CR-101 on October 13, 2020](#). A [presentation](#) that outlines the components, process, and timeline of this rule making is available [here](#).

Most wolves in the state (76 percent of known packs in 2020) were not involved in any documented livestock depredation. In 2020, WDFW lethally removed three wolves from the Wedge Pack (comprising the entire pack) that were involved in repeated depredations of livestock following the guidance of the state's [Wolf Conservation and Management Plan](#) and [wolf-livestock interaction protocol](#). As of this writing, no wolves have



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been lethally removed in 2021 and depredations documented statewide are at their lowest level in recent years. More information at: wdfw.wa.gov/wolves. If you are interested in receiving email notifications of wolf activity updates, you can [sign up here](#).

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): WDFW is leading the [Southwest Washington Small Forest Lands Conservation Partnership RCPP](#), collaborating with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), DNR, the Conservation Commission, eight conservation districts, and WSU Extension. To date, the CDs and DNR have completed 111 forest stewardship plans that make producers eligible for NRCS financial assistance. WSU Extension's outreach and education efforts have reached over 1,050 landowners representing over 27,000 acres. The partners and NRCS have thus far provided \$237,665 to help nine forest landowners improve forest health, fish and wildlife habitat, and water quality through the EQIP program. One landowner was also assisted through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) with a contract totaling \$10,558. The Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) is an easement program that focuses on forest conservation and restoration for the benefit of endangered and threatened species. HFRP within this RCPP is directed toward marbled murrelet and marbled murrelet habitat. WDFW and their partners held a sign up and did landowner outreach to promote the program. We received nine applications, of which, seven projects were determined to be a good fit through the screening process. The projects were then ranked on a variety of factors, where the top one or two projects will be selected for funding. WDFW is also a partner in several other RCPP efforts in Washington.

Shared Stewardship Strategy: In May of 2019, WDFW and DNR signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Pacific Northwest Region of the U.S. Forest Service on Shared Stewardship. Shared Stewardship is a collaborative process between the agencies to work on shared priorities across boundaries at the landscape level. The agencies will work with tribes, conservation districts, private landowners, nongovernmental organizations, and other stakeholders to plan and implement the right work, in the right places, at the right scale to achieve meaningful outcomes. The MOU addresses: ecological restoration (forest health, reducing wildfire risk, and protecting/enhancing Puget Sound), sustainable recreation, sustainable infrastructure, fish and wildlife conservation, and healthy communities through jobs and economic activity. The Forest Service, WDFW, and DNR are in the process of identifying focal areas to pilot Shared Stewardship. The focal areas will not preclude Shared Stewardship work in other areas of the state as needs and opportunities arise. The intent is to focus resources in key areas to achieve meaningful outcomes and learn how to effectively combine our unique authorities and skillsets. The agencies will coordinate with local partners on needs and opportunities to bring in resources to plan, design, permit, and implement projects. Look for more details in the future as the agencies develop and implement a communication and outreach plan to rollout Shared Stewardship. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/news/state-federal-agencies-align-historic-partnership-reduce-wildfire-risk-and-improve-forests>

Cooperation with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): WDFW and NRCS are continuing their working relationship through contribution agreements to work on fish passage, screening and habitat projects and wildlife habitat through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). WDFW and NRCS have a mutual interest in promoting the conservation and wise use of land, water, wildlife, and related resources, as well as ensuring that NRCS Farm Bill programs are effectively implemented and address conservation priorities. Both NRCS and WDFW desire to make the best technical assistance available to land users and to encourage participation in the various USDA financial incentives offered under the Farm Bill conservation programs. To avoid duplication of effort, improve communication, and streamline the delivery of technical assistance to the land user, both



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parties have agreed to cooperate by assigning certain tasks in the delivery of technical assistance by each agency. Accelerated delivery of technical and administrative assistance through funding provided by these agreements will increase staff resources and enhance fish and wildlife habitat and associated natural resources.

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE): WDFW's private lands biologists continued to provide technical assistance to farmers enrolled in the SAFE initiative of CRP. Farmers have enrolled over 118,000 acres in SAFE in Washington, with nearly 73,000 acres in Douglas County, home to the core populations of state endangered greater sage-grouse and sharp-tailed grouse, and federally endangered Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit. This year the Farm Service Agency (FSA) moved SAFE whole field practices back to Continuous CRP from the earlier change to General CRP, allowing producers additional opportunities to enroll in the program.

The 2018 Farm Bill struck the broad waiver language that allowed a county's cropland acreage enrolled in CRP to exceed 25 percent and makes only Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) eligible for this waiver. Now, in counties like Douglas County, FSA cannot offer a CRP signup until enough contracts expire to get under the 25 percent county cropland acreage cap, which will take one to two years. Feedback from producers indicates support for FSA allowing Douglas County CRP enrollment to exceed the 25% county cropland acreage cap due to the high-quality wildlife cover it provides.

WDFW's Shrubsteppe Wildfire Proviso

Background

Historic fires in summer and fall 2020 burned over 600,000 acres of shrubsteppe habitat in Washington, impacting 50% of the area occupied by sage and sharp-tailed grouse and eliminating pygmy rabbits in one of three recovery areas within the state. The Washington State Legislature guided WDFW to restore shrubsteppe habitat and associated wildlife impacted by wildfires through a budget proviso in the 2021-23 biennium. Over \$2 million operating funds from the state general fund are to be appropriated each biennium. An additional \$1.5 million of capital funds to rebuild wildlife-friendly fences in prioritized areas will be available through June 2023.

The Shrubsteppe Proviso includes two elements:

- A) Implementation of restoration actions, which may include: 1) species-specific recovery actions; 2) increasing the availability of native plant materials; 3) increasing the number of certified and trained personnel for implementation at scale; 4) support for wildlife-friendly fencing replacement; 5) support for private landowners/ranchers to defer wildland grazing and allow natural habitat regeneration.
- B) Formation of a collaborative group process representing diverse stakeholders and facilitated by a neutral third-party to develop a long-term strategy for shrubsteppe conservation and fire preparedness, response, and restoration to meet the needs of the state's shrubsteppe wildlife and human communities.

Collaborating for Success

WDFW has partnered with the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) and the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to form a Steering Committee that meets regularly to make decisions



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and guide the implementation of the proviso. WDFW is grateful to SCC and DNR for their dedication and commitment to making this program a success. The complementary perspectives and expertise brought by each entity positively enhance the process, discussions, and outcomes. The Steering Committee works under a consensus-based decision-making model that has been very productive.

Entities and partners that have a vested interest in the shrubsteppe landscape were invited to be advisors in the effort. Advisors are shrubsteppe landowners or land managers who have dedicated staff or direct significant resources to the shrubsteppe landscape. Two advisory groups were convened, each with diverse representation from local, state, federal, tribal, agricultural, and conservation organizations. The Near-Term Action Advisory Group informs and makes recommendations to the Steering Committee on restoration program development. The Long-term Strategy Advisory Group's charge is to inform the development of a comprehensive strategy to address the threat of wildfire in the shrubsteppe landscape.

Working together to define the future: developing a long-term strategy

A portion of the funding will be used to support a collaborative group process representing diverse stakeholders and facilitated by a neutral third-party to develop a long-term strategy for shrubsteppe conservation and fire preparedness, response, and restoration to meet the needs of the state's shrubsteppe wildlife and human communities. The strategy will address spatial priorities for shrubsteppe conservation, filling gaps in fire coverage, management tools to reduce fire-prone conditions on public and private lands, landscape scale habitat restoration needs, and identifying and making recommendations on any other threats to the shrubsteppe. This work is expected to begin in early 2022.

Delivering restoration services today: implementing near-term actions

Most of the legislative funding will be used to support shrubsteppe wildlife and communities through a restoration service delivery program. We aim to remove barriers and bottlenecks to implementing landscape scale habitat restoration by providing resources such as cultural resource reviews, trained personnel and labor, native seeds and plants, fencing materials for wildlife-friendly versions, and hay to ranchers wishing to defer grazing to allow burned habitat time to recover. Building a landscape scale service delivery program will allow us to leverage additional funding sources and enable our collective ability to react quickly and respond to restoration needs within the narrow ecological windows that exist immediately after wildfires occur.

Initial focus for near-term actions will be on areas impacted by the Pearl Hill fire (Douglas County) and Whitney fire (Lincoln County). Within the burn footprints we'll prioritize areas of high wildlife value, high burn severity, and cheatgrass invasion potential. The state funding is not intended solely for state lands or WDFW-managed lands. Instead, this funding can be used on any land ownership (private, state, tribal, federal, other) in areas prioritized for wildlife benefit and where opportunities exist.

Near-Term Action Advisory Group and Technical Teams

More than two dozen people serve on the Near-Term Action Advisory Group, with diverse representation from local, state, federal, tribal, agricultural, and conservation organizations. This advisory group informs and makes recommendations to the Steering Committee on restoration program development including delivery mechanisms and spatial priorities. In addition, six technical teams consisting of subject matter experts are



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working to identify how to expedite the delivery of shrubsteppe restoration services on the ground. The six teams and their purposes are:

- Cultural Resources - Recommend ways to increase capacity to protect cultural resources and conduct cultural resource reviews in order to restore habitat at scale.
- Native Plant Materials – Recommend ways to enhance the availability of native plant materials.
- Species Recovery - Recommend projects for shrubsteppe species affected by the Pearl Hill and Whitney wildfires that would bolster their populations in the interim while habitat restoration gets underway.
- Deferred Wildland Grazing - Recommend best approach and explore delivery mechanisms to temporarily defer grazing to rest burned habitat and promote recovery.
- Wildlife Friendly Fence - Recommend wildlife friendly fencing program that decrease hazards and migration barriers while meeting landowner needs.
- Technical Tool - Recommend software and database solutions to inventory materials, track budget, make assignments, and conduct project planning. Provide mapping products for spatial prioritization.

Timeline

The Steering Committee has been meeting regularly since April 2021. Near-term Action Advisors and associated technical teams have been meeting since August 2021. We aim to stand up the restoration service delivery program by January 2022 and open project solicitation to landowners seeking resources to restore habitat, replace or retrofit wildlife friendly fence, or rest grazing land by February. The Long-term strategy Advisory group will begin meeting in January 2022 and meet monthly, aiming to have the final strategy developed by June 2023.

For more information about the Steering Committee and Advisory Groups, including meeting calendars, agendas, and materials, visit WDFW's website at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/advisory/ssc>. There is dedicated time reserved for public comment at Advisory Group meetings.



NEWS RELEASE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Oct. 5, 2021

Contact: [Celina Abercrombie](#), 360-628-2589; [Joey Murphy](#), 360-763-2066

WDFW partners with local communities to restore river habitat to benefit salmon and other aquatic species in the Chehalis Basin

Construction work done for this year, will continue in Summer 2022 on Satsop and Wynoochee rivers

OLYMPIA – Construction work to restore habitat in the Satsop, Skookumchuck, and Wynoochee rivers has wrapped up for the year. This summer, crews worked to restore 12,700 feet of river shoreline and treat 288 acres for invasive plants to benefit salmon and other aquatic species in the Chehalis Basin.

As the second-largest watershed fully within Washington, the Chehalis Basin sustains southwest Washington communities, economies, and some of the most important salmon runs in Washington. It is also home to the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation and the Quinault Indian Nation.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is sponsoring five river restoration projects as part of the [Aquatic Species Restoration Plan \(ASRP\)](#), a science-based plan designed to effectively rebuild and protect a productive ecosystem that is resilient to the impacts of climate change. These five projects are taking place on the Newaukum, Satsop, Skookumchuck, and Wynoochee rivers, and on Stillman Creek, a tributary to the South Fork Chehalis River.

The ASRP Steering Committee with the support of the Chehalis Basin Board received funding from the Washington State Legislature in 2019 through the [Department of Ecology's Office of Chehalis Basin](#) and the [Chehalis Basin Strategy](#) to complete these projects. The projects will provide critical habitat for fish and wildlife and inform future river restoration efforts throughout the basin.

The first WDFW-sponsored project was completed in September on the [Skookumchuck River](#) restoring over 4,700 feet of shoreline and protecting 102 acres of land to provide critical habitat for salmon and other aquatic species.

This summer was the first season of construction for the [Satsop and Wynoochee River Restoration Projects](#). The second and final season of construction is expected to be completed in 2022, with a combined total of 8,000 feet of shoreline restored.

“We appreciated people’s patience and understanding during in-water construction work this summer on the Satsop and Wynoochee rivers,” said Celina Abercrombie, Chehalis Basin Strategy Manager for WDFW. “Access to sections of these rivers was restricted from mid-



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June through August, and the same restrictions will be in place next summer to protect public safety during construction.”

To view maps of restricted access areas during in-water construction on the Satsop and Wynoochee rivers, visit [WDFW's website](#).

Much of this year's construction on the Satsop took place on over 100 acres of permanently protected land acquired by Forterra to support restoration efforts in collaboration with private landowners. This fall, crews will enhance this area with native plants.

The Grays Harbor Conservation District has also been a steadfast partner on the Satsop and Wynoochee projects by bringing landowners and project partners together to advance these large-scale restoration efforts.

Restoration projects on the Newaukum River and on Stillman Creek will begin in summer 2022.

Each of the WDFW-sponsored river restoration projects includes installing native trees and shrubs, removing invasive species such as blackberry and knotweed, constructing engineered log jams, and reconnecting floodplain and off-channel habitats.

Rivers in the Chehalis Basin provide important habitat for Chinook salmon, coho salmon, and steelhead, as well as other native fish species, including mountain whitefish, rainbow trout, cutthroat trout, Dolly Varden, and bull trout. Olympic mud minnow, a species of concern in Washington, are found in nearby wetlands and sloughs. Freshwater mussels and various amphibian species, including the western toad and Van Dyke's salamander, may also benefit from these habitat restoration projects.

WDFW works to preserve, protect, and perpetuate fish, wildlife and ecosystems while providing sustainable fish and wildlife recreational and commercial opportunities.

Individuals who need to receive this information in an alternative format, language, or who need reasonable accommodations to participate in WDFW-sponsored public meetings or other activities may contact the Title VI/ADA Compliance Coordinator by phone at 360-902-2349, TTY (711), or email (Title6@dfw.wa.gov). For more information, see <https://wdfw.wa.gov/accessibility/requests-accommodation>.



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Engineered log jams help stabilize stream banks and keep our rivers healthy, improving the survival of salmon and other native fish and wildlife.





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Large woody debris forms pools for juvenile fish and provides food source and habitat for aquatic insects.