

**Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**2024 Issue Highlights Report for the Washington Association of Conservation Districts**



*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:** Kelly Susewind is entering his sixth year as director of 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 2,400 employees statewide working toward the mission of conserving fish and wildlife and providing sustainable recreational and commercial opportunities.

**Southern Resident Killer Whale (SRKW) Recovery Progress:** As of the July 1, 2024 census, the current population estimate of SRKW stands at 73. In September 2024, one calf was born in the SRKW population, but the survival status of this calf (L128) is unknown. A calf (J60) born in December 2023 went missing in January of 2024, and a 33-year-old male (L85) is also presumed dead. In 2024, WDFW designated 16 whales as especially vulnerable due to poor body condition (15 whales) or late-stage pregnancy (one whale). Under the commercial whale watching licensing program, designated 'vulnerable' whales and calves under one receive extra protections. Because of this almost no commercial viewing of SRKW at closer than one-half nautical mile happened in 2024, the fourth year in which WDFW issued commercial whale watching licenses.

The Legislature directed the Department to report on effectiveness and potential improvements to the licensing program, rules for commercial viewing of SRKW, and other regulations aimed at protecting SRKW from vessels in 2022, 2024, and 2026. WDFW delivered the first [adaptive management report](#) in November 2022, and the Department is currently finalizing the 2024 report (expected Nov. 30, 2024).

In 2023, new legislation (ESSB 5371) introduced changes to the approach distance for all vessels, increasing the buffer around SRKW to 1,000 yards beginning in 2025. To prepare the boating public for this change, the Department is conducting additional outreach and education informed by the Orca Regulations Communications Advisory Group (ORCA Group) that convened throughout 2024, with included two public boater workshops. The ORCA Group's final report and recommendations will be incorporated in the 2024 adaptive management report.

Outreach and public engagement remain critical pieces of the SRKW recovery effort, and WDFW thanks the conservation districts for leading the seventh annual Orca Recovery Day on Oct. 19, 2024. Many of the efforts described in other sections of this report support SRKW. More information about the Department's SRKW recovery effort is available on [WDFW's website](#).

**High Resolution Change Detection (HRCDD):** Through funding from the State Conservation Commission (SCC), WDFW provides **High Resolution Change Detection (HRCDD) data** which uses aerial imagery to analyze land cover change overtime. In 2024, WDFW provided two HRCDD trainings for participating Conservation Districts and published the HRCDD Quality Assurance Guide.

**Washington's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) will be revised by October 2025:** Every U.S. state and territory has a State Wildlife Actions Plan or “SWAP.” These plans have been around since 2005 and are updated at *least* every ten years. WDFW is currently revising the Washington SWAP, with big picture updates presented at the [Commission briefing on Aug. 9, 2024](#) and the [public meeting from Aug. 28, 2024](#). Washington’s SWAP guides WDFW’s conservation work and funding to better understand and address conservation challenges in our state. Despite the name, these plans are not just for “wildlife”: fish, wildlife, plants, habitats, systems and landscapes are conservation targets.

WDFW hosted information meetings in Summer 2024 and will host another round of engagement in early 2025 to review plan content and again in Summer 2025 to present a draft plan review opportunity. The first survey for conservation and public communities was open from Sept. 23 through Nov.15, 2024. Want to learn more about WDFW’s biodiversity, ecoregions, and the SWAP update? Check out our [Biodiversity web page](#) and [SWAP webpage](#) for videos, information, and ways to participate in the SWAP update.

**Shared Stewardship Strategy:** WDFW continues to partner with the U.S. Forest Service and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Shared Stewardship is a collaborative process between state and federal agencies to work on mutual priorities across boundaries at the landscape scale. WDFW is currently adding capacity through two new Shared Stewardship Implementation Lead positions in central Washington and northwest Washington. The intent is to focus resources in key areas to achieve meaningful outcomes and learn how to effectively combine our unique authorities and skillsets. These focal areas will not preclude Shared Stewardship work in other areas of the state. The agencies will coordinate with local partners on needs and opportunities to bring in resources to plan, design, permit, and implement projects.

**Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP):** WDFW continues to partner with the State Conservation Commission and (primarily) Conservation Districts to support counties enrolled in the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP). The VSP is a statewide program for protecting and enhancing critical areas on agricultural land while maintaining the viability of agriculture. Currently, 27 of Washington’s 39 counties participate in the program. Activities and accomplishments in 2024 include:

1. In 2024, WDFW and state agency partners traveled to 14 VSP events, hosted by Conservation Districts, to learn about the conservation work happening statewide.
2. WDFW published the Monitoring Resources for Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas to assist VSP counties with critical area monitoring on agricultural land.

**Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI):** Historic wildfires in summer and fall 2020 burned more than 600,000 acres of shrubsteppe habitat in Washington and resulted in impacts to wildlife and people in the shrubsteppe landscape. In response to the unprecedented damage from these fires, the Washington State Legislature, through a budget proviso, directed the WDFW to collaborate with the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC), and DNR to restore shrubsteppe habitat and associated wildlife impacted by wildland fire. Together, these three agencies worked together to implement immediate actions that support wildlife habitat and rural landowners in response to these fires, and collaboratively develop a long-term strategy to conserve and restore wildlife habitats, enhance wildfire preparedness and response, and support working lands in Eastern Washington’s shrubsteppe landscape. This collective effort is the Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI).

[WSRRI's Long-Term Strategy](#) was published and delivered to the Legislature March 2024.

WSRRI's primary objective is to conserve and restore Washington's shrubsteppe wildlife and habitat with an emphasis on addressing the escalating extent, frequency, and severity of wildland fires. WSRRI also addresses the needs of people that live and work in Washington's shrubsteppe ecosystems and benefit from healthy and resilient landscapes, habitat, and wildlife populations. WSRRI is grounded in the principles of collaboration, synergy, and efficiency. The strategy seeks to identify existing efforts and capacity, build upon and support them, and fill gaps to achieve the goal of shrubsteppe landscape conservation and restoration. The development of the long-term strategy was closely informed and guided by an advisory group comprised of tribal nations and diverse stakeholders with a vested interest in Washington's shrubsteppe landscape, including various public and private partners. Input from Conservation Districts and other partners have been foundational in ensuring that WSRRI's 30-year strategy speaks to the needs and interests of the broad and varied communities of Washington's shrubsteppe.

Collectively WDFW, SCC, and DNR, as the WSRRI Steering Committee agencies, have been busy implementing many of the strategy actions since the time the Strategy was published. Highlighted accomplishments include:

- Organization and Governance
  - Establishment and recruiting for a WSRRI Program Manager (WDFW is host agency)
  - Drafting a Memorandum of Understanding between the three agencies that makes explicit commitments to WSRRI
  - Seeking considerable additional funding to expand WSRRI's reach and implementation capacity (through grants and SCC legislative request)
- Community Engagement
  - Drafting a joint Community Engagement Plan
  - Enhancing WSRRI's web presence and resource library
- Habitat Protection
  - Strengthened integration of WSRRI Spatial Data into conservation planning work, including spatial data training for Conservation District staff and publishing a data user's guide.
  - Continued investment in wildlife-friendly fencing (WFF) by removing burned fence and installing 44 miles of hard wire WFF fence and virtual fence supporting ~25,000 acres of rangeland.
- Growing Shared Capacity & Resources
  - Hiring and recruiting for shrubsteppe restoration biologists
  - Producing locally-sourced native plant materials, such as sagebrush plugs and seed produced by Sustainability in Prison's Program
  - Hiring and deploying on-the-ground crews, such as the Washington Conservation Corps
  - Investing in landscape scale equipment
- Implementing Habitat Restoration Projects
  - Fire line repair projects, including in cooperation with Conservation Districts
  - Native shrub restoration, such as with Spokane Tribe of Indians
  - Seeding restoration projects
  - Riparian restoration (Beaver Dam Analogs)

These projects contribute to approximately 70 WSRRI-funded and supported projects, across wildlife friendly fencing, grazing deferment, habitat restoration, and species recovery since passage of the Shrubsteppe Proviso in 2021.

**Riparian Data Engine (RDE):** WDFW is developing a **Riparian Data Engine (RDE)** using the HRCD data that will be available to Conservation Districts to inform VSP monitoring and implementation efforts. The RDE development team engaged Conservation Districts as an end user focus group in the development of this tool.

**Grazing:** In 2024, WDFW managed 72 agricultural leases across 11,000 acres and 45 grazing permits across 94,441 acres. Among these included the first grazing permit in Region 6 at Scatter Creek Wildlife Area. WDFW also used virtual fencing to exclude cattle from sensitive zones within permit areas. Two permittees used virtual fence in the Teanaway Community Forest and Columbia Basin Wildlife Area, and it was moderately successful in its first season.

**Forests:** Since the Strategy for Managing the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife’s Forests was adopted in 2014, WDFW has completed 10,499 acres of commercial thinning, 9,148 acres of non-commercial thinning, 6,316 acres of prescribed burning, 501 acres of tree planting, and 211 acres of weed control (invasive Scot’s broom, Himalayan blackberry, English holly, etc.) to restore forests on WDFW-managed wildlife areas. So far in 2024 (as of Sept. 10), WDFW has completed 1,003 acres of commercial thinning, 16 acres of non-commercial thinning, 404 acres of prescribed burning, 82 acres of tree planting, and 62 acres of weed control. 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. Project example below: Untreated vs treated forests on the Chelan Wildlife Area.

**Untreated**



**Treated**



**Wolves:** Since 2008, Washington’s wolf population has grown by an average of 23% per year. The state’s minimum year-end wolf population in 2023 increased by 20% and marks the 15<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of population growth. As of Dec. 31, 2023, WDFW and Tribes counted 260 wolves in 42 packs in Washington state. Twenty-five of these were successful breeding pairs. These numbers compare with the previous year’s count of 216 wolves in 37 packs and 26 breeding pairs. Because this is a minimum count, the total number of wolves in Washington is likely higher. For more information on the status of wolves in Washington, please see the [2023 Annual Wolf Report](#).

The WDFW wolf-livestock conflict management and expectations for non-lethal and lethal measures continue to operate under the guidance of the [2011 Wolf Conservation and Management Plan](#) and the [2017 Wolf-Livestock Interaction Protocol](#).

Annually, most wolves in the state (79% of known packs in 2023) are not involved in any documented livestock depredation. Nine of 42 packs (21%) statewide were implicated in at least one livestock depredation incident in 2023. Only two packs (5%) have been implicated in more than one or two livestock depredation incidents, and six total wolves were removed in 2023.

In July 2024, the Fish and Wildlife Commission decided that wolves should remain listed as an endangered species.

More information at: [wdfw.wa.gov/wolves](https://wdfw.wa.gov/wolves). If you are interested in receiving email notifications of wolf activity updates, you can [sign up here](#).

**Prescribed Fire:** WDFW has conducted prescribed fire operations on WDFW-managed lands since the early 2000's. Over the years the program has evolved from conducting prescribed or controlled burns on just a few areas in the state to a statewide program. WDFW treats lands and ecosystems for many reasons, fuels and wildfire reduction, evasive vegetation control, and wildlife habitat improvement. The burn program has grown to help address statewide needs. WDFW has also been working closely with our Tribes, state and federal partners, and NGOs to complete these burns together and expand available resource needs to assist each other.

**Before**



**During Treatment**



**After**



**Cooperation with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS):** WDFW and NRCS have a mutual interest in promoting the conservation and wise use of land, water, wildlife, and related resources, and 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.

**Biodiversity Funding:** In spring 2023, WDFW received landmark legislative funding dedicated to protecting and restoring Washington's biodiversity and implementing the SWAP. That critical work is now well underway in many capacities statewide and across the agency, from species recovery and data collection projects, to expanded capacity for land-use planning and regulatory support, to increased guidance on habitat management, and more.

In fiscal year 2024, WDFW funded 16 grants, allocating \$1.1 million to fund biodiversity projects statewide. These biodiversity-funded grants advance a range of recovery actions and data collection efforts that will support recovery of at least 20 Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN)

representing a variety of wildlife species in Washington. WDFW is pleased to offer funding for a second round of projects for the 2025-2027 biennium for a total of \$2 million.

Beyond supporting partners, we've also been able to expand in-agency capacity to help accelerate work across programs. We have expanded our teams of expert biologists on SGCN, hiring more headquarters species leads as well as regional experts who lead SGCN recovery and data collection projects on the ground. When it comes to land-use planning, we've invested in regional land-use leads to engage with many local jurisdictions on comprehensive land use plans and critical areas ordinances under the Growth Management Act. And, we're already seeing many jurisdictions incorporate the guidance and feedback we provide. We've also expanded our Priority Habitats and Species section, adding shrubsteppe, habitat connectivity, nearshore, and riparian experts to help improve online spatial data layers and other habitat management recommendations for local jurisdictions, tribes, and other landowners.

We are also developing statewide beaver habitat management guidelines to provide opportunities for ecological restoration in appropriate locations while reducing landowner conflicts and enabling co-existence of beavers and the human-made landscape.

These examples showcase the breadth of work necessary to gather actionable data about species and habitats in Washington, create guidance that describes what to do to protect and restore these resources, and assist people to take the right actions. We're already seeing the results of these investments and are hopeful to work with the legislature to expand the work to other imperiled species and places that haven't yet received attention.



### **Monitoring for invasive mussels ramping up; lesson plan on European green crabs**

If invasive freshwater mussels take hold in Washington, officials estimate it would cost more than \$100 million each year to keep our power and water infrastructure running, in addition to causing extensive ecological damage such as impeding salmon recovery and fish passage. [Quagga](#) and [zebra mussels](#) are considered the most economically damaging aquatic organisms to invade the United States, and they showed up in Idaho last year

\$3.62 million in new funding from the state legislature and federal partners that begins July 1 will allow WDFW to increase monitoring for harmful quagga and zebra mussels. [Learn more in our blog post.](#)

We also have information available on how to [Clean, Drain, and Dry](#) watercraft to avoid spreading invasive mussels.

On the aquatic invasive species front in Western Washington, we published a new Wild Washington environmental education lesson plan for middle school students titled "[Green Crab Alert: Invasion in Washington's waters](#)". This "mini unit" is certified by the Office of Superintendent of Public Education and supplements the state's OpenSci Education unit 7.5 Ecosystem Dynamics: "How does changing an ecosystem affect what lives there?". Additional updates on trapping and management of invasive green crabs are available [on our webpage](#).



### **Chronic wasting disease confirmed for the first time in Washington**

Washington’s first case of chronic wasting disease (CWD) has been confirmed in a white-tailed deer found dead in north Spokane County.

CWD is a fatal illness of cervids (deer, elk, moose, and caribou). The disease is caused by mutated proteins known as prions, which can contaminate the environment and be transmitted between animals through feces, saliva, and urine.

In an effort to manage the spread of CWD, WDFW has filed multiple emergency rules that may impact hunters in Region 1. Please review the [Emergency rule changes](#) and [Frequently asked CWD questions](#) for more information on how confirmation of this disease in our state could impact you as a hunter. Information on CWD in general is also on the WDFW [website](#).



### **The Salmon Fishing Current blog provides timely in-season updates**

At the conclusion of the 2024–2025 [North of Falcon salmon season setting process](#) this spring, WDFW created The Salmon Fishing Current blog. Since late June, the blog keeps anglers regularly informed of any in-season fishing rule changes, emergency closures, or other related developments in Puget Sound, the coast, and Columbia River.

Washington’s salmon fisheries are one of the most complex fishery management systems in the world, and WDFW fishery managers work hard to keep the public informed on sport fishing-related regulations. You can read more by visiting the [WDFW blog](#).



### **New version of Fish Washington mobile application**

The Department launched an upgraded version of the [Fish Washington mobile application](#) (app) now available to download on both Apple iOS and Android devices.

Following a testing process in winter 2024, the new version is designed to run more smoothly while using less data and device memory. Developers completely rewrote the app’s code, which now features a single code base for both iOS and Android platforms. This means a smaller app size, less frequent updates, and fewer bugs.

Other improvements include location-enabled United States Geological Service (USGS) river gauges, more consistent emergency regulation delivery, and map upgrades. The new version will show the full water body name and description on emergency regulation cards. With a data connection, the app also includes National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA) tidal predictions for marine waters and portions of the Columbia River, as well as river gauges from multiple data providers. Learn more in our [news release](#).