

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
2023 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 fifth 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 2,000 employees throughout the state in their mission of conserving fish and wildlife and providing sustainable recreational and commercial opportunities.

Southern Resident Killer Whale (SRKW) Recovery Progress: The current population estimate of SRKW stands at 75. Two calves were added to the SRKW population in 2023, including L126 (M) and L127 (F). No SRKW died between July of 2022 and July of 2023, but since then, a K pod whale has gone missing. In 2023, WDFW designated 11 whales as especially vulnerable due to poor body condition (10 whales) or late-stage pregnancy (1 whale). Under the licensing program, 'vulnerable' whales and calves under the age of one receive extra protections, and thus, almost no commercial viewing of SRKW at closer than one-half nautical mile happened in 2023, the third year in which WDFW issued commercial whale watching licenses.

The same bill that created the commercial whale watching licensing program and changed the speed and approach distance for all boats operating near SRKW also directed the Department to report back to the Legislature in 2022, 2024, and 2026. The first [adaptive management report](#) was delivered in November of 2022, and it discussed the effectiveness of, and recommended changes to, the license and rules for commercial whale watching plus the general approach distance rules. This report informed legislation introduced in the 2023 legislative session, which ultimately passed.

This legislation, ESSB 5371, made structural changes to the commercial whale watching and sea paddle tour licensing framework and fees. Most notably, it introduced changes to the approach distance for all vessels, increasing the buffer around SRKW to 1,000 yards beginning in 2025. In order to prepare the boating public for this change, the bill directed the Department to conduct additional outreach and education informed by an Orca Regulations Communications Advisory Group (ORCA Group) that will meet from late 2023 through June 2025. Public workshops will invite broader engagement to inform boater outreach efforts, and anyone interested can [sign up for our SRKW mailing list](#) to receive updates.

Outreach and public engagement remain important pieces of the SRKW recovery effort, and WDFW thanks the conservation districts for leading the sixth annual Orca Recovery Day on Oct. 14, 2023. 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](#).

Shared Stewardship Strategy: WDFW continues to partner with the U.S. Forest Service and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) on shared stewardship of forests and rangelands. Shared Stewardship is a collaborative process between state and federal agencies to work on mutual priorities across boundaries at the landscape scale. This includes work on all lands, not just public lands. The agencies 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. Washington's Shared Stewardship Memorandum of Understanding 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 piloting Shared Stewardship in Central Puget Sound, Central Washington, and Northeast 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. More information is available in the [WDFW's Role in Shared Stewardship presentation](#).

Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP): WDFW continues to partner with the Washington State Conservation Commission and state and local partners 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.

In 2023, WDFW and state partners traveled to 13 counties to learn about VSP efforts across the state. We toured several conservation projects, discussed VSP monitoring needs, and learned about ag viability efforts like the Columbia Community Creamery in Chewelah and Vets on the Farm in Spokane that are helping support local farmers. WDFW thanks conservation district and county staff for hosting these site visits and looks forward to visiting more counties in 2024.

WDFW developed new resources under our [Priority Habitats and Species](#) (PHS) program to support counties with mapping and monitoring Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas (refer to the PHS section for full details). These resources include updated maps for Biodiversity Areas and Corridors in the Columbia Plateau and shrubsteppe and Eastside steppe, and new management recommendations for riparian ecosystems and pollinators. Contact your [local Habitat Biologist](#) to learn more about incorporating this information into your VSP Work Plan and Monitoring Plan.

WDFW also provides [High Resolution Change Detection](#) (HRCD) services to support VSP counties with critical area monitoring. In 2023, the HRCD program completed an analysis of 2011-2021 change detection data that is available for counties to use. In 2025, counties will receive change detection data for 2021-2023 to support the next VSP 5-Year Reporting process. To help counties utilize this data, we are excited to announce that we will be offering new HRCD training opportunities. We will have more information to share in the coming months as we get these training courses launched! For assistance with HRCD data, contact Robin Hale (robin.hale@dfw.wa.gov).



Photo: Whitman County VSP Tour



Photo: Stevens County VSP Tour



Photo: San Juan County VSP Tour



Photo: Mason County VSP Tour



Photo: Skagit County VSP Tour



Photo: Stevens County VSP Tour

Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) and Land Use Conservation & Policy (LUCP) Update: PHS has been split into two work units to better influence land use planning and to better manage increased staff capacity. The PHS work unit continues to develop and provide best available science and management recommendations for how to identify and protect priority habitats and species. The LUCP work unit focuses on communicating that information out to counties and cities to consider in the periodic updates of their Comprehensive Plans and Critical Areas Ordinances. Within LUCP is the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) described previously.

Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) Section: PHS provides spatial data and technical assistance to help planners, landowners, and others identify *what* habitats and species are WDFW priorities for conservation and protections through the Growth Management Act, *where* those priority species and habitats are located, and *how* these priority habitats and species can be protected.

In 2023, PHS published two new sets of management recommendations relating to the conservation of pollinators. The first provides guidance on [pollinator management within riparian areas](#) and the second describes management actions to identify and protect the [western bumblebee](#).

In 2023, PHS also published a new data layer for the Columbia Plateau identifying regionally significant Biodiversity Areas and Corridors. Biodiversity Areas and Corridors are lands with comparatively rich and abundant wildlife that are connected to allow wildlife to move freely and safely between core habitat areas. PHS Biodiversity Areas outside of urban growth areas must be identified using “a scientifically based assessment conducted over a landscape scale,” as defined in the [PHS List](#) (see WDFW 2008). PHS Corridors are defined as “areas of relatively undisturbed and unbroken tracts of vegetation that connect fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas, priority habitats, or areas identified as biologically diverse” (i.e., Biodiversity Areas). The data can be found on [PHS on the Web](#) and we have published a [Biodiversity Areas and Corridors User Guide](#) that provides more detailed information about this data.

Finally, PHS completed a comprehensive map of PHS-defined shrubsteppe and Eastside steppe and published a companion [User Guide](#) that summarizes how the data layer was created and provides guidance for how the data can be applied.

Land Use and Conservation Policy Section: Through close coordination and collaboration with Habitat regional staff, LUCP staff assist local jurisdictions statewide with science-based land use policy updates and implementation. Primary among these activities has been engaging with cities and counties to offer technical assistance in amending their Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas and other development regulations to ensure no net loss of habitat functions and values. LUCP staff created a Riparian Management Zone [Checklist](#) for Critical Areas Ordinances (CAO) and an [addendum](#) with CAO citations to help local planners with their updates. LUCP staff also coordinate and collaborate with the counties enrolled in the Voluntary Stewardship Program (see VSP section).

WACD Biodiversity Funding: Habitat loss and degradation, climate change effects, pollution, wildlife disease, and invasive species are accelerating the loss of Washington’s biodiversity at an unprecedented rate. In the 2023 Legislative Session, the WDFW requested funds to implement the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), including habitat and species conservation, along with public education and outreach. The Legislature provided \$24 million of that request for 2023-25 with \$31 million ongoing beginning in 2025-27. This funding provides critical support for 268 species of greatest conservation need (SGCN), including recovery projects for pygmy rabbits, sage grouse, western pond turtles, northern leopard frog, Taylor’s checkerspot butterfly, and sharp-tailed grouse. This funding will also enable WDFW to work closer with

local governments and partners to improve open space conservation and zoning and ensure working lands continue to provide benefits to fish and wildlife into the future.

Forests: Since the *Strategy for Managing the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife's Forests* was adopted in 2014, WDFW has completed 9,090 acres of non-commercial thinning, 8,910 acres of commercial thinning, 5,906 acres of prescribed burning, 419 acres of planting and 80 acres of weed control (invasive Scot's broom and Himalayan blackberry) to restore forests on WDFW-managed wildlife areas. So far in 2023, WDFW has completed 981 acres of commercial thinning, 126 acres of pre-commercial thinning, 192 acres of prescribed burning and 80 acres of weed control. Treatments were designed to bring forests back into their historic ranges of variability or put them on accelerated trajectories to reach 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.

Project example below: Before and after pictures from the Methow Wildlife Area where excess conifers were thinned to relieve old-growth pines from excessive competition, improve mule deer winter range habitat, and reduce wildfire risks.



Photo: Untreated



Photo: After commercial thinning & prescribed fire

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): The primary purpose of the [Southwest Washington Small Forest Lands Conservation Partnership RCPP](#) was to build capacity for DNR and three conservation districts to provide technical and financial assistance to small forest landowners through NRCS funding and partner contributions.

WDFW led 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 through its conclusion on September 30, 2023. At the end of the project, the partners exceeded our objective of assisting small forest landowners to develop 200 stewardship plans by 27%. The partners completed a total of 254 FMPs that meet the requirements of WA Instruction 190-380, with 103 of these FMPs at CAP106 level. Additionally, all partners have plans in progress and waiting lists. Partners provided \$2,194,765.44 in match for the project, exceeding the initial match commitment by 114%. Additionally, partners and the NRCS provided \$229,300 to forest landowners to improve forest health, fish and wildlife habitat, and water quality on 962 acres through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Landowners have also been assisted through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) with \$210,279 in funding obligated to enhance 1280 acres under this project.

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 2022 increased by 5% and marks the 14th consecutive year of population growth. As of Dec. 31, 2022, WDFW and tribes counted 216 wolves in 37 packs in Washington; 26 of these were successful breeding pairs. These numbers compare with the previous year’s count of 206 wolves in 33 packs and 19 breeding pairs. Because this is a minimum count, the total number of wolves in Washington is likely higher.

WDFW released a [draft Periodic Status Review for the Gray Wolf](#) in May 2023 for public comment. WDFW’s recommendation to the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission is to reclassify the wolf from State Endangered to State Sensitive, meaning the population is “vulnerable or declining and is likely to become endangered or threatened in a significant portion of its range within the state without cooperative management or removal of threats” (WAC 220-610-110). This status reflects the significant progress toward recovery that Washington’s wolf population has made since the original state listing in 1980, but recognizes that wolves remain vulnerable in western Washington and should continue to be managed for recovery within the state as a protected species. Continued population growth and range expansion will depend on the robustness of source populations in eastern Washington (as well as neighboring states and provinces) and cooperative management to ensure sources of human-caused mortality do not impede recovery. This action does not affect the federal designation of Endangered in the western two-thirds of Washington.

WDFW recommends maintaining the Wolf Plan recovery targets for delisting of at least four successful breeding pairs in each recovery region. We believe that these targets are attainable through natural recolonization and ensure adequate distribution of reproducing wolves throughout the state. WDFW does not recommend delisting wolves at this time.

[Downlisting](#) wolves to state sensitive status would continue to protect them under RCW 77.15.130 and protections precluding hunting would remain in place. The definitions of State Threatened and State Sensitive under WAC 220-610-110 are very similar, and both fall under the designation of protected wildlife under RCW 77.15.130.

The 90-day public comment period for the draft [Periodic Status Review](#) closed on Aug. 16. WDFW received over 12,000 comments on the draft. WDFW staff will review the comments, and tentatively plan to release the Final Periodic Status Review in February 2024, followed by a Fish and Wildlife Commission briefing and public hearing in March 2024, and Commission decision in April 2024 (subject to change).

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](#).

Year after year, most wolves in the state (81% of known packs in 2022) are not involved in any documented livestock depredation. As of this writing, two wolves were removed in 2023 in response to repeated livestock depredation, representing less than 1% of the population. More information is available on [WDFW’s Wolves webpage](#). If you are interested in receiving email notifications of wolf activity updates, you can [sign up here](#).

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.

Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI): Historic wildfires in summer and fall 2020 burned over 600,000 acres of shrubsteppe habitat in Washington and resulted in impacts to 50% of the area occupied by sage and sharp-tailed grouse and loss of one of three pygmy rabbit recovery areas within the state. In response, the Washington Legislature guided WDFW to restore shrubsteppe habitat and associated wildlife impacted by wildfire through a budget proviso in the 2021-23 biennium. WDFW partnered with the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) and the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to form a Steering Committee to make decisions and guide the execution of two proviso elements:

1. Implementation of restoration actions, which may include: a) species-specific recovery actions; b) increasing the availability of native plant materials; c) increasing the number of certified and trained personnel for implementation at scale; d) support for wildlife-friendly fencing replacement; e) support for private landowners/ranchers to defer wildland grazing and allow natural habitat regeneration; and
2. Development of 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, through a collaborative group process representing diverse stakeholders and facilitated by a neutral third-party.

Taken together, these two proviso elements are the foundation of the Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI). WSRRI's vision is a resilient shrubsteppe ecosystem, restored and maintained through collaborative partnership for the benefit of wildlife and human communities. WSRRI aims to:

- Expand and enhance available resources;
- Deliver support for restoration actions by providing coordinated and shared resources and services to landowners on the ground; and
- Be responsive with restoration resources and services within the critical ecological windows that occur post-fire.

Implementation of Restoration Actions: The original budget proviso biennially appropriated \$2.3 million in operating funds from the state general fund. An additional \$1.5 million of capital funds were available through the original proviso funding to rebuild wildlife-friendly fences in prioritized areas. In the 2023-25 biennium, the State Conservation Commission was awarded an additional \$1.5 million for wildlife friendly fencing.

These funds collectively are dedicated to increasing capacity and resources, through a restoration service delivery program, to respond to wildfire and increase resiliency across the Columbia Plateau. WSRRI investments into expanded capacity, as informed and recommended previously by the Near-term Action Advisory Group, include: contracted dedicated Washington Conservation Corps crews; a full-time restoration coordinator; technical assistance capacity through Conservation Districts; Cultural Resource review services through WDFW, Conservation Districts, and consulting firms; sagebrush production

through the Sustainability in Prisons Project; native seed purchase from local growers; and equipment critical to habitat restoration.

Through this program, we aim to remove barriers and bottlenecks to implementing restoration and resiliency actions that benefit both wildlife and human communities. These actions principally include: habitat restoration, where we aim to expand native, perennial plant communities where they remain and re-establish them where they have been lost; wildlife friendly fencing, which supports producers in managing livestock while also minimizing wildlife harm and mortality; and deferred grazing, through which we incentivize landowners to rest pastures after fire to allow for habitat recovery. Highlighted accomplishments over the past year include:

- Weed control after fire to increase resiliency in native plant communities (~200 acres);
- Increasing wildlife value of seed mixes used on lands enrolled in USDA Farm Bill programs (640 acres);
- Augmenting beaver dam analogs and post-assisted log structures (~16 river miles);
- Planting sagebrush plugs to return living seed sources to burned landscapes (64,000 plugs on 6 sites);
- Hand-seeding native grasses to re-plant wildfire control lines;
- Removal of burned fence from the landscape to decrease hazards to wildlife (5 miles);
- Installation or retrofit of fence to wildlife friendly standards to decrease hazards to wildlife (14 miles).

In addition, the WSRRI Sterring Committee WSRRI just committed FY24 funds to rebuilding approximately 50 miles of fencing that was lost or damaged in past wildfires to wildlife friendly specifications.

Development of the WSRRI Long-term Strategy: Since early 2022, entities and partners that have a vested interest in the shrubsteppe landscape have contributed to WSRRI's Long-term Strategy Advisory Group, working groups, and 'focus table' discussions, all organized and managed to inform the development of a comprehensive conservation strategy that addresses the threat of wildfire in the shrubsteppe landscape. Specifically, this 30-year plan 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. Several conservation districts are participating in these ongoing discussions.

Beyond developing goals and objectives, these collective groups have also developed strategy over the past year to identify actions needed to achieve objectives and address threats and to define, geographically, WSRRI's spatial priorities for where those actions should occur. Actions have been collaboratively identified through in-depth focus table discussions around Community Engagement, Habitat Protection, Fire Management, Species Management, and Habitat Restoration.

A full draft strategy was developed in Fall 2023 has been developed and WSRRI is now initiating several rounds of review, including tribal and public review. The full strategy will be submitted to the Legislature in Spring 2024.