

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
2025 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 seventh 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 2,500 employees statewide working toward the mission of conserving fish and wildlife and providing sustainable recreational and commercial opportunities.

High Resolution Change Detection (HRCd): Through funding from the State Conservation Commission (SCC), WDFW provides **High Resolution Change Detection (HRCd) data** to select Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) counties to assist them with VSP implementation, monitoring, and reporting. HRCd uses aerial imagery to analyze land cover change overtime. In 2025, WDFW provided VSP counties with up-to-date HRCd data to support the 10-year reporting process. In 2026, WDFW will expand the number of counties receiving support by providing 2011 land cover data to 14 additional counties. Landcover data provides baseline information on the presence and height of trees, shrubs, and herbaceous vegetation.

Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP): WDFW continues to partner with SCC and 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, 28 of Washington's 39 counties participate in the program. WDFW's activities and accomplishments in 2025 include:

- WDFW and partners attended 12 VSP site visits, hosted by conservation districts and counties, to learn about the VSP conservation work happening statewide.
- WDFW assisted the SCC with the development of several new resources to support the VSP 10-year reporting process, including the reporting database, reporting guide, and monitoring plan review tool. WDFW participated in seven individual county consultations to support county reporting needs.

The SCC and partners are available to schedule individual consultations with VSP counties:

sccwagov.app.box.com/s/enq454yc2cpf5f7fyhf1js8r4czg4she

Forests: Since WDFW adopted its Strategy for Managing Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife's Forests in 2014, the Department has completed 11,619 acres of commercial thinning, 10,013 acres of non-commercial thinning, 7,105 acres of prescribed burning, 694 acres of tree planting, and 527 acres of weed control (Scot's broom, Himalayan blackberry, English holly, etc.) to restore forests on WDFW-managed wildlife areas. So far in 2025 (as of Sept. 30), WDFW has completed 358 acres of commercial thinning, 120 acres of non-commercial thinning, 642 acres of prescribed burning, 189 acres of tree planting and 84 acres of weed control. In addition to improving wildlife habitat, these treatments make forests more resilient so that they are less vulnerable to severe wildfires or insect outbreaks in the future. Project example below: Untreated vs. restored oak savanna on the Scatter Creek Wildlife Area.

With a 78% funding cut in the 2025-2027 biennium, efforts will be more focused on planning than implementation during the next couple years.

Untreated



Treated



Shrubsteppe mapping: WDFW updated its mapping of Shrubsteppe and Eastside Steppe – Priority Habitats under WDFW’s Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) program. The map update is described in [this document](#).

Shrubsteppe decision support: The [Shrubsteppe Decision Support Tools](#) (2024) document provides additional guidance for local government planners and Voluntary Stewardship workgroups for interpreting and applying shrubsteppe decisions support tools including PHS resources and other resources created by or in conjunction with WDFW.

Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI): The Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI), jointly led by WDFW, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) and SCC, is a collaborative effort 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. In the 2025 legislative session, on behalf of WSRRI, SCC put forward a capital budget request to support WSRRI’s goals and objectives. The Legislature provided \$3 million in response to support additional habitat restoration, wildlife friendly fencing, and other projects in the 25-27 biennium.

In April 2025, WDFW hired Janet Gorrell as the WSRRI Program Manager, to initially focus, quickly, on standing up a project solicitation process, with supporting administrative tools, to deliver these resources to partners, landowners and tribal governments, for habitat restoration, wildlife friendly fencing, and deferred grazing in the 25-27 biennium. Submitted projects will be evaluated and selected for support in November. WSRRI will soon pivot to standing up a long-term strategy advisory group to guide the broader implementation of the [WSRRI Long-term Strategy](#).

In the 23-25 biennium, WSRRI funded the development of 55 miles of wildlife-friendly fencing and the application of virtual fencing to benefit 26,300 acres, across five conservation districts, including Okanogan, Foster Creek, Kittitas, North Yakima, and Eastern Klickitat. Further, with the Washington Conservation Corps (WCC), WSRRI continued to remove unneeded fence from the landscape and mark standing or newly constructed fences to discourage grouse collisions.

To support habitat restoration, WSRRRI secures cultural resource review services, contracts plant production, and supports projects typically implemented with agricultural machinery. In 2025, WSRRRI bought several key machines to expand its capacity and increase the scale of its restoration projects. With projects implemented in 2025, WSRRRI's total habitat restoration accomplishments include upland restoration on 3,464 acres, including hand-planting of 106,500 sagebrush plugs, and improvement of more than 11 miles of streamside habitat, mostly through installation of beaver-dam analogue structures.

In 2025, WSRRRI also worked with multiple partners to accomplish the following:

- **Conservation Northwest** gathered information, through surveys and interviews with virtual fence vendors, ranchers, and the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission, to develop recommendations and standards for best practices around ongoing WSRRRI investment in virtual fencing;
- **DNR** tested the capabilities of its Multi-Mission Aircraft (MMA) for grouse inventories and shrubsteppe habitat mapping;
- **Foster Creek Conservation District** hosted 2025's Camp Sagebrush, supported, in part, by WSRRRI;
- **United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)** funded two seed storage and cooling units for shared-partner use and WDFW is actively working to install these; and
- **Pheasants Forever** provided additional habitat restoration services, including project coordination/planning, technical assistance site preparation, and project implementation.

Wolves: Since 2008, Washington's wolf population has grown by an average of 20% per year. For the first time, state's minimum year-end wolf population count in 2024 decreased by 9%. As of Dec. 31, 2024, WDFW and tribes counted 230 wolves in 43 packs in Washington state with 18 of these were successful breeding pairs. These numbers compare with the previous year's (2023) count of 254 wolves in 42 packs and 24 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 refer to the [2024 Annual Wolf Report](#).

WDFW's 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 [2020 Wolf-Livestock Interaction Protocol](#).

Year after year, most wolves in the state (around 77% of known packs in 2024) are not involved in any documented livestock depredation. Up to ten of the 43 known packs (23%) statewide were implicated in at least one livestock depredation incident in 2024. Only four packs (less than 10%) have been implicated in more than one or two livestock depredation incidents, and four wolves were removed in 2024. WDFW investigators documented 40 depredation events and determined 17 cattle (primarily calves), and one dog were confirmed killed by wolves, two calves were probably killed by wolves, 26 cattle were confirmed injured by wolves, while two adult cows, and eight calves were probably injured by wolves. In many of these instances there were reactionary non-lethal tools applied to the situations to deter future depredations, and they have had good results. However, four wolves from two packs were removed to help minimize the chances of future depredations on livestock.

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

Grazing: In 2025, WDFW managed 75 agricultural leases covering almost 11,000 acres. WDFW installed six new water meters in its North Central Region to monitor and increase water use efficiency in agricultural leases. WDFW also managed 48 grazing permits covering close to 99,000 acres. WDFW issues a new, temporary grazing permit was in Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area and will monitor it for success. WDFW conducted long term ecological integrity monitoring for 15 permits.



Methow WLA 2025



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Guidelines for Solar and Wind Energy Development: In October 2025, WDFW released [Guidelines for Utility-Scale Solar and Onshore Wind Energy Development in Washington State](#), following a multi-year process involving tribes, stakeholders and industry representatives. These guidelines aim to help developers in the early identification and avoidance of conservation priorities while considering the practical siting requirements, such as existing electrical infrastructure, interconnection, land use regulations, and other sensitive resources. WDFW recognizes that renewable energy siting decisions must incorporate these additional considerations to achieve both avoidance and minimization of ecological impacts and viable project development.

Riparian Data Engine (RDE): WDFW has developed and rolled out the **Riparian Data Engine (RDE)** using the HRCD data that will be available to Conservation Districts to inform riparian restoration planning and prioritization as well as VSP monitoring and implementation efforts. The RDE development team engaged conservation districts in the development of this tool. WDFW is interested in helping conservation districts maximize the utility of this tool to support their conservation work with private landowners.

Riparian field guides: WDFW published [Guidelines for Determining Site Potential Tree Height from Field Measurements](#) (2025) which allows forestry professionals to determine a site's SPH_{200yr} using field measurements. Those guidelines are used in conjunction with WDFW's [SPH_{200yr} Calculator](#).

Prescribed Fire: WDFW has continued its effort of applying prescribed fire across WDFW-managed lands despite a significant forest health budget reduction (80%) to its normal operating budget this biennium. The reduction reduced staffing levels by 65% decreased funding for burning. With dedicated staff and cooperation from other state, federal, and nonprofit partners, the Department was still able to complete 603 acres since last year's report.

WDFW continues efforts on south sound prairies in Western Washington. The Department also uses prescribed fires at WDFW-managed lands along the coast to enhance habitat for rare and endangered butterfly species. These efforts also help to reduce wildfire risk and enhance historic food plots for indigenous cultures.

Scatter Creek Wildlife Area (WLA)



Left side, burned in July 2025. Desirable vegetation returning to the unit.

Right side, a burn completed in Sept. 2025.

Combined forest management tactics of thinning and prescribed burning help reduce wildfire risk and enhance wildlife habitat on the Sherman Creek and Rustlers Gulch WLA's

Rustlers Gulch WLA



RX burn completed in June 2025



Native vegetation returning in August 2025

One year after the Retreat fire in Yakima County, DFW and DNR partnered to provide a tour for agency officials, legislators, county staff, media, and other interested parties. The tour focused on how wildfires impact the landscape but also focus on other practices such as thinning and prescribed fire help reduce wildfire impacts.

Oak WLA, one year after the Retreat fire.



Wildfire effects just outside of prescribed burn area through



Prescribed burn unit after Retreat fire burned

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.

Shared Stewardship Strategy: WDFW continues to partner with USFS and DNR on a Shared Stewardship Strategy. Shared Stewardship is a collaborative process between state and federal agencies to work on mutual priorities across boundaries at the landscape scale. WDFW has added capacity through two new Shared Stewardship Implementation Lead positions (three total) adding central Washington and northwest Washington to southwest Washington. The focus is on coordinating resources in key areas to achieve meaningful outcomes and learn how to effectively combine our unique authorities and skillsets. These focal areas do not preclude Shared Stewardship work in other areas of the state. The agencies continue to coordinate with local partners on needs and opportunities to bring in resources to plan, design, permit, and implement projects.

Biodiversity funding: In spring 2023, WDFW received landmark legislative funding dedicated to protecting and restoring Washington’s biodiversity and implementing the SWAP. This funding increased our ability to know when and where animals can be found, identify what actions will protect and recover them and their habitats, help partners use that information to protect and restore lands, and help Washingtonians of all ages learn about this biodiversity and what they can do to help. This critical work is now well underway in many capacities statewide and across the agency, and you can see some of the exciting results we’re already seeing in the [Columbia Basin](#) and [Puget Sound](#) areas.



Skagit Wildlife Area reopened, estuary restoration project completed

October saw several milestones for the Skagit Wildlife Area in the North Puget Sound Region, including [reopening the Skagit Headquarters Unit](#). The area—also known as Wiley Slough—is popular for water access, waterfowl hunting, bird watching, and walking and has been closed for construction since 2023. The renovated area features a new concrete boat launch offering access to the South Fork Skagit River and Skagit

Bay, as well as an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-accessible loading ramp and reconfigured parking area. There is also a hand-launch area for kayaks and canoes, elevated dikes with graded, ADA-accessible walking trails, an updated wildlife-viewing blind, and replanted areas to restore marsh and riparian habitat.

The nearby [Milltown Island Unit](#) also reopened to the public following extensive estuary restoration work to improve fish and wildlife habitat. More information on estuary restoration projects on WDFW-managed lands is available [on this webpage](#). Information and tips for hunting can be found in the [Skagit Wildlife Area Waterfowl Hunting Guide \(PDF\)](#).



Protecting our waters from invasive quagga and zebra mussels

In early January, WDFW removed 21 gallons of invasive quagga and zebra mussels — the largest volume ever removed from a single vessel — from a tugboat intercepted at the Spokane watercraft inspection station. Had the boat not stopped for an inspection, these invasive mussels could have ended up in Washington’s waters. Learn more about

this first detection of 2025, what WDFW is doing to protect our waters, and how you can help on the [WDFW blog](#).



Recovering the northwestern pond turtle and northern leopard frog

Washington's wetlands are home to a wide diversity of wildlife, including everything from aquatic invertebrates to amphibians and migratory birds. Two of Washington's iconic wetland species, the northwestern pond turtle and the northern leopard frog, are listed as endangered in the state. In the face of habitat loss, invasive species

predation, disease, and population isolation, WDFW and many partners have been working to help recover these species through habitat restoration, invasive species management, disease treatment, and headstarting programs. Refer to WDFW's [blog post](#) for more information.



WDFW awards \$1 million in Wildlife Diversity Grants for at-risk species

WDFW has announced the next round of Wildlife Diversity Grant recipients, awarding approximately \$1 million to support eight collaborative projects over the next two years. This significant investment focuses on Washington's most at-risk wildlife species, reflecting WDFW's broader strategy for long-term species recovery. These grants include both crucial second-phase funding for ongoing

successful projects and support for new proposals addressing emerging conservation needs statewide. Projects range from protecting rare snakes and monitoring endangered shorebirds to creating artificial burrows for burrowing owls and controlling invasive bullfrog populations. This initiative demonstrates WDFW's commitment to sustained, collaborative, science-based action, investing in both momentum and innovation for biodiversity conservation.



Monitoring a hawk fledgling

WDFW biologists continue to follow hawk 264292, a ferruginous hawk fledgling banded in spring 2024 that we've been tracking on her annual migration. In our blog [Take two: the continued travels of hawk 264292](#), find out how 264292 has made some different choices than other hawks and how her parents are teaching us what prey these endangered birds need to survive.



Hope on the edge of the abyss: Northern spotted owl family raises fledglings in Eastern Washington

On Aug. 6, WDFW and USFS staff witnessed a remarkable conservation milestone: A northern spotted owl pair nesting north of I-90 in the East Cascades successfully raised two fledglings—the only known breeding young in that region this year. This compelling observation offers a rare glimmer of hope amid steep population declines driven by habitat loss,

wildfires, and invasive barred owl competition. Despite this success, the species remains fragile, with juvenile survival rates low and threats mounting. WDFW emphasizes the urgency of a multifaceted recovery strategy: protecting mature forest habitat, implementing barred owl management, and exploring population support efforts such as translocation and headstarting. This sighting reinforces that, with proactive, coordinated action across state, federal, and tribal partners, recovery of this iconic Pacific Northwest indicator species is still within reach. Read more about the encounter and spotted owls in our [blog post](#).