

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
2022 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 fourth 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 1,950 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 73. Two calves were added to the SRKW population in 2022, including J59 and K45: the first calf born to K pod in over a decade. Both calves were determined to be females. Three whales (K21, K44, and L89) are presumed to have died since July of 2021. In addition, WDFW designated 13 whales as especially vulnerable due to poor body condition (12 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 2022, the second 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, due Nov. 30, will discuss the effectiveness of, and any recommended changes to, the license and rules for commercial whale watching plus the general approach distance rules. This report will be informed by updated science, effectiveness analysis, and a public process conducted in September and October to receive feedback from industry, recreational boaters, and the broader public. Outreach and public engagement remain important pieces of the SRKW recovery effort, and WDFW thanks the conservation districts for leading the fifth annual Orca Recovery Day - Oct. 15, 2022. Information regarding other activities supporting the SRKW recovery effort is included in other sections of this report. More information is available at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/at-risk/species-recovery/orca>

Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) Update: The Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) is a statewide program for counties to meet the critical area protection standards of the Growth Management Act on agricultural land while improving the viability of agriculture. The program uses voluntary and incentive-based measures to work with private landowners. To-date, 27 of Washington's 39 counties participate in the program.

In 2022, WDFW continued to engage in VSP efforts at the state and local level to support counties with VSP implementation following the 5-year review process in 2020-2021. At the state level, Ecosystem Services Division Manager Tom O'Brien is serving as the new WDFW representative on the state agency Technical Panel where he provides policy and programmatic support to the Washington State Conservation Commission. At the local level, WDFW's VSP Coordinator and regional staff continue to participate in Work Group meetings and met with several conservation district and county staff to

discuss feedback from the 5-year review process. In collaboration with state partners, WDFW scheduled VSP site visits with counties in southeast, north central, and southwest Washington to improve our understanding of VSP efforts across the state. WDFW thanks the conservation district and county staff for hosting these site visits and hopes to continue to visit other areas of the state in the coming year. Finally, WDFW's Habitat Program Science Division staff finalized High Resolution Change Detection (HRCDD) data for 2017-2019, which will be available for the respective counties shortly. We expect HRCDD data for 2019-2021 to be complete by the end of the biennium. As we move ahead in VSP, WDFW staff are available to provide technical assistance with fish and wildlife efforts and HRCDD data review and analysis.

Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) Update: In 2022, WDFW's PHS program focused on three items of interest for Conservation Districts: shrubsteppe, Eastside steppe, and riparian. This year WDFW updated its map of PHS-defined Shrubsteppe and Eastside Steppe Priority Habitats using best available science to improve the statewide mapping of shrubsteppe and Eastside steppe. The data is available on the PHS webpage along with a Statement of Intended Use. This update coincides with our 2020 revisions to WDFW's Management Recommendations for Washington's Priority Habitats: Shrubsteppe, which acknowledged the function and role of fire in the management of shrubsteppe habitat.

In addition, PHS staff continued to support implementation of previously released PHS Riparian management recommendations (available at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/publications/01988>). The online mapping tool helps users determine our recommended Riparian Management Zone (RMZ) delineation based on site-potential tree height (SPTH). With respect to land use planning, WDFW worked with Ecology to update agriculture water quality best management practices to reflect SPTH-based RMZs. WDFW also collaborated with Ecology to evaluate Skagit County's Shoreline Master Program update especially with respect to RMZ placement relative to channel migration zones. Finally, WDFW assisted the city of Anacortes to amend their Critical Areas Ordinance consistent with a Growth Management Hearings Board order regarding riparian area widths and best available science.

Forests: Since 2014 when the *Strategy for Managing the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife's Forests* was adopted, WDFW has completed 8,601 acres of non-commercial thinning, 7,929 acres of commercial thinning and 5,377 acres of prescribed burning to restore forests on wildlife areas. So far in 2022 WDFW has completed 1,467 acres of commercial thinning, 47 acres of pre-commercial thinning and 2 acres of prescribed burning. 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 Scatter Creek Wildlife Area where invading conifers were thinned to save old-growth oaks, restore habitat federally threatened Mazama pocket gopher, and expand pheasant hunting areas.



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 the agencies to work on shared priorities across boundaries at the landscape scale. This includes work on all-lands, not just public lands. 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 Washington state 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. The 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 about WDFW's priorities under Shared Stewardship: [WDFW's Role in Shared Stewardship presentation](#).

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 208 forest stewardship plans, exceeding our goal of 200, with ten months remaining in the project. WSU Extension's outreach and education efforts have reached more than 2839 landowners representing over 77,103 acres. The partners and NRCS have thus far provided \$229,300 to forest landowners 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. Our top two ranked easement selections declined the offer to enroll their properties, so the Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) component of the project has been closed. Although the RCPP portfolio will not include a closed easement, a lot of great work has been, and will be, achieved by the time this project comes to a close through the EQIP and CSP components. Additionally, several of the HFRP applicant landowners will continue to implement other conservation practices on their lands and are inspired to seek permanent land protection in the future. WDFW is also a partner in several other RCPP efforts in Washington.

Wolves: Since 2008, Washington’s wolf population has grown by an average of 25% per year. The state’s minimum year-end wolf population in 2021 increased by 16% and marks the 13th consecutive year of population growth. As of Dec. 31, 2021, WDFW and Tribes counted 206 wolves in 33 packs in Washington state. 19 of these were successful breeding pairs. These numbers compare with the previous year’s count of 178 wolves in 29 packs and 16 breeding pairs. Because this is a minimum count, the total number of wolves in Washington is likely higher.

On Feb. 19, 2022, University of Washington scientists briefed the Fish and Wildlife Commission on their wolf population model and potential conservation and management scenarios that will inform the Periodic Status Review for wolves. The meeting recording is available [here](#) (presentation starts at approximately 1:03:00) and the associated presentation is available [here](#). Results indicated “confidence that the wolf population is growing” and that Washington’s wolves would eventually recolonize all suitable habitat in Washington, including the South Cascades and Olympic Peninsula. Of management scenarios analyzed, cessation of out of state immigration and high additive harvest had the highest impacts on future wolf population abundance.

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission made a decision to not adopt or amend rules as part of the [Wolf Livestock Conflict Deterrence Rule making](#) proposals on July 8, 2022. The Commission voted to approve the [Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement](#) Alternative Four, which was the ‘no action alternative’ and does not adopt or amend wolf livestock conflict rules. The WDFW wolf-livestock conflict management and expectations for non-lethal and lethal measures will 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 (76% of known packs in 2021) are not involved in any documented livestock depredation. As of this writing, seven of 33 packs (21%) statewide have been implicated in at least one livestock depredation incident in 2022. Only three packs (9%) have been implicated in more than one or two livestock depredation incidents – Leadpoint (seven incidents), Smackout (10 incidents), and Togo (four incidents). 81% of all documented depredation in 2022 can be attributed to these three packs. In response to repeated livestock depredation, two wolves were removed from the Leadpoint pack, one wolf was removed from the Smackout pack, and two wolves were removed from the Togo pack. A juvenile wolf, now suspected of being from the Dirty Shirt pack but near a Smackout collared wolf on the periphery of the Smackout pack territory, was also removed. As of this writing, six total wolves were removed in 2022, representing less than 3% of the population. More information at: wdfw.wa.gov/wolves. 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 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 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. The Farm Service Agency, Natural Resource Conservation Service, WDFW, and Washington Association of Conservation Districts partner to implement this program, which accepts applications on a continuous basis. To date, farmers have enrolled over 123,495 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. Changes to the 2018 Farm Bill are hindering the efforts and partnerships formed through SAFE. The legislation struck the broad waiver language that allowed a county's cropland acreage enrolled in CRP to exceed 25% and makes only Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) eligible for this waiver, when previously SAFE was also eligible. Douglas County has reached its CRP cap and cannot enroll additional acres into the program. With no opportunity to reenroll current CRP and/or SAFE CRP acres, producers could resume farming operations or sell their land to development. To keep these valuable acres in conservation, it is key to have a system and incentives in place to maintain enrollment and provide opportunities for new enrollment of SAFE CRP in Douglas County.

Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI): 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 wildland fire through a budget proviso in the 2021-23 biennium. \$2.3 million in 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 proviso included 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.

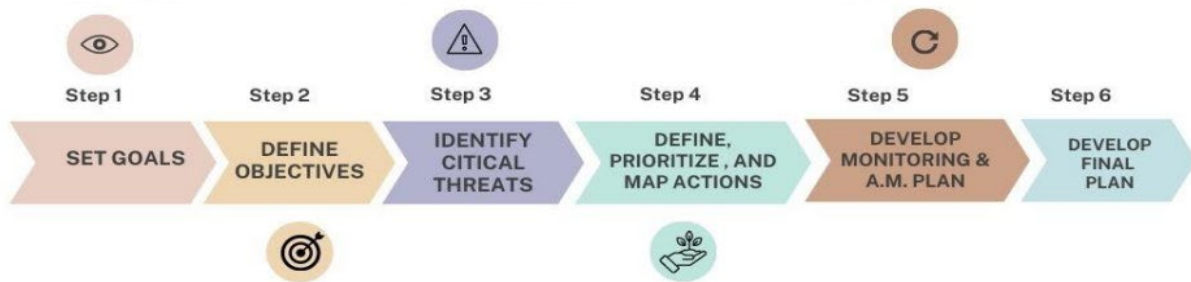
B) Formation of a collaborative group process representing diverse stakeholders and facilitated by a neutral third-party to develop a long-term strategy for shrubsteppe conservation and fire preparedness, response, and restoration to meet the needs of the state's shrubsteppe wildlife and human communities.

Taken together these two proviso elements are the foundation of the Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI).

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 and guide WSRRI. 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 are participating as 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 and implementation. The Long-term Strategy Advisory Group’s charge is to inform the development of a comprehensive conservation strategy that addresses the threat of wildfire in the shrubsteppe landscape. Several conservation districts are participating directly in both advisory groups and supporting technical teams.

The Long-Term Strategy Advisory Group (LTSAG), facilitated by the neutral third-party Triangle Associates, is working to form the building blocks of a 30-year 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. The LTSAG has worked together with subject matter experts and the WSRRI Steering Committee to identify values, set a vision, define goals, identify threats, and draft SMART objectives for the strategy. Defining actions to achieve objectives, the enabling conditions needed to ensure actions can be implemented, and mapping spatial priorities will be accomplished over the fall/winter 2022-3. Full draft strategy is expected to be completed summer 2023.



Values

- Resilient Landscape
- Collaborative Engagement
- Multi-benefit solutions
- Wildlife Habitat
- Climate adaptation
- Informed by science
- Long-term Relationships
- Address Threats

Vision - A resilient Shrubsteppe ecosystem, restored and maintained through collaborative partnership for the benefit of wildlife and human communities.

WSRRI supports 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.

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
- Be responsive with restoration resources and services within the critical ecological windows that occur post fire

Informed by our Near-Term Action Advisory Group, WSRRI has put in place several elements of expanded capacity including:

Habitat Restoration

- Hired WDFW Restoration Coordinator
- Contracted with Washington Conservation Corps
- Engaged SCC and Conservation Districts
- Purchased seed drill

Cultural Resources

- Engaged with Tribes, Conservation Districts for archeological services
- Contracted archeological consultants
- In process of hiring WDFW archeologist

Native Plant Materials

- Partnered with Sustainability in Prisons Project to grow sagebrush plugs and seeds
- Purchased native seed stock from local growers to be ready to respond to wildfire events

Initial WSRRI on-the-ground support has been primarily focused in areas impacted by the Pearl Hill, Cold Springs, and Whitney fires (Douglas, Okanogan, Lincoln counties). Within the burn footprints priority considerations included areas of high wildlife value, high burn severity, and cheatgrass invasion potential. This funding can be used on any land ownership (private, state, tribal, federal, other) in areas prioritized for wildlife benefit and where opportunities exist. A solicitation for projects went out February 2022, a second solicitation for WSRRI projects is expected December 2022.

Projects supported to date include:

Habitat Restoration

Habitat restoration is a WSRRI focus area. Our habitat restoration objectives are to enhance and restore wildlife habitat, with special emphasis on Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Restoration efforts aim to expand native, perennial plant communities where they remain and re-establish them where they have been lost. WSSR has supported several habitat restoration projects over the past year including:

- Upland seeding on private and public land (~1000 acres)
- Ensuring resiliency by controlling invasives after fire (~150 acres)
- Enhancing CRP seed mix for increased wildlife value (~400 acres)
- Riparian restoration using beaver dam analogs and post-assisted log structures (~16 river miles)

Deferred Grazing

WSRRI offers support for producers wishing to defer grazing in areas impacted by fire. The objectives of the WSRRI deferred grazing program are to: 1) promote habitat recovery in burned areas; and 2) avoid overgrazing intact areas too close to recently burned areas. The WSRRI deferred grazing program is facilitated through the State Conservation Commission and Conservation Districts. The program offers reimbursements for hay or alternative pasture rental (75% cost-share, up to \$10k/yr per producer). To date WSRRI has supported 11 landowners and rested over ~35k acres of habitat.

Wildlife Friendly Fence

WSRRI supports the removal and replacement of burned fence and retrofit of existing fence with wildlife friendly versions. In addition to traditional hard fences designed to be wildlife-friendly, WSRRI is proud to support landowners piloting virtual fence in Washington. Virtual fences hold promise to provide significant benefit to producers as well as removing barriers that can impact wildlife. WSRRI fence work is primarily facilitated through the State Conservation Commission and Conservation Districts.

Accomplishments to date include:

- Over a marathon's worth of burned fence wire hazards removed from the landscape
- Installation or retrofit of over 20 miles of wildlife friendly fence
- Four virtual fence projects underway, which provide coverage for over 40,000 acres.