

Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI)

Partner Newsletter, Spring 2025

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WSRRI's Program Manager Capacity

As many of you know, WSRRI has been without a Program Manager since October 2024. While WDFW moved to fill the position quickly after Christine Davis' departure, the process was slowed due to budget uncertainties at the program and agency levels. The WSRRI Steering Committee is pleased to announce that Janet Gorrell has accepted the WSRRI Program Manager position, and she will formally start in this capacity on May 16th. Janet comes into this role with 20 years of experience in wildlife conservation at state agencies, 17 of those with WDFW. Most recently, Janet served as WDFW's Landscape Conservation Section Manager overseeing the work of five Environmental Planners focusing collectively on habitat restoration, habitat protection, and conservation planning across the state to benefit Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN). Since WSRRI's inception, Janet has served on the WSRRI Steering Committee, and she played a significant role in development of the WSRRI Long-term Strategy.



In the near-term, as the WSRRI Program Manager, Janet will be focusing on assisting the Steering Committee in standing up the Advisory Group, soliciting for new project support for the coming biennium, and generating a WSRRI database for project selection and implementation tracking. Longer-term, she will be responsible for implementation coordination by facilitating collaboration between the Steering Committee, the Advisory Group, and partners; monitoring and reporting on WSRRI progress; and managing overall communications. Janet can be reached at 360-902-8309 and Janet.Gorrell@dfw.wa.gov.

Upcoming Biennium WSRRI Budget

In this year's legislative session, on behalf of WSRRI, the State Conservation Commission put forward a \$5 million Capital Budget request to bring additional state resources to meeting WSRRI's goals and objectives. We are encouraged to report that \$3 million appeared in both the Senate and House versions of the budget, and the conference budget sent to the Governor for signature. This funding will support additional habitat restoration and wildlife friendly fencing projects and technical assistance for project development. Further, it will allow WSRRI to invest in a central WSRRI "hub", or facility where project materials (e.g., seeds, fence markers) and equipment can be stored, catalogued and maintained, and easily delivered to landowners and managers for project implementation. The WSRRI Steering Committee sincerely thanks the Legislature, our agency leaders, and our partners, that have supported this request throughout the legislative session.



Project and Investment Highlights

WSRRI's vision is a resilient shrubsteppe landscape achieved through collaborative partnerships for the benefit of wildlife and human communities. We seek to build upon existing efforts and capacity and fill gaps to realize that vision, by coordinating and sharing resources and services across ownerships. To that end, WSRRI has been working to make targeted strategic investments, both programmatically and locally, where opportunities arise to support habitat restoration, boost native plant availability, support ranchers, and increase capacity, services, and materials to implement the [WSRRI Long-term Strategy](#). The following is a brief summary of WSRRI's recent projects and investments.

Habitat Restoration

- **Riparian Enhancement in Douglas County.** WSRRI supported three riparian enhancement projects in 2025, in partnership with Trout Unlimited, WDFW, Pheasants Forever, Anabran Solutions, the Chelan-Douglas Land Trust, and the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, enhancing riparian habitat along approximately 3 miles of stream. These projects include beaver-dam analog structures constructed from posts driven into streambeds and incorporating brush woven between those posts to imitate beaver dams. WCC crews cut invasive woody plants from the Wells Wildlife Area to use a raw material for this work, and to facilitate delivery of approximately 1000 posts by helicopter to a remote site.
- **Ginkgo State Park.** We have continued to support post-fire restoration on Ginkgo State Park after the Vantage Highway fire in 2022. In Fall of 2024, WSRRI supported a final herbicide application to 600 acres where the fire had enabled an acute weed invasion.
- **Spokane Tribal Land.** WSRRI completed its second year of post-fire sagebrush planting with the Spokane Tribe, with the aid of a DNR planting crew comprising inmates from the Department of Correction facility in Airway Heights. The crew planted 24,000 sagebrush plugs in one week of work at an impressive pace, improving 246 acres of habitat from which shrubs were mostly absent due to wildfire.
- WSRRI contracted with the **Eastern Klickitat Conservation District (EKCD)** to work with landowners to rehabilitate fire control lines created during the Newell Road (2023) and Big Horn (2024) fires, improving fish and wildlife habitat and addressing encroachment by invasive weeds. EKCD is collaborating with affected landowners to determine rehabilitation treatments, coordinate treatment implementation, and purchase restoration materials.



*Beaver dam analog construction by WCC Crew.
Photo by Kurt Merg, WDFW.*

- **Wells Wildlife Area.** We are supporting restoration on more than 500 acres of WDFW land in Douglas County. While much of this multi-year project will be supported by the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, WSRRI has begun to remove derelict fences on this property to reduce hazards to wildlife and to enable access by the machinery that will be used to restore a diverse, native plant community. WSRRI is also supporting an aerial application of herbicide to the site in June of 2025.
- WSRRI is currently contracting with **Pheasants Forever** to provide additional habitat restoration services, during a very busy spring field season, in the form of project coordination/planning, technical assistance to partners in project planning and implementation, site preparation for planned future restoration activities, and assistance to ongoing WSRRI-supported projects. Pheasants Forever is providing needed capacity to a suite of partners, including US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Chelan Douglas Land Trust, and the Foster Creek Conservation District,
- **Capacity and Equipment.** In October 2024, WDFW was able to hire Tyler Jenkins to assist Kurt Merg in managing the implementation of habitat restoration projects. Tyler has managed WSRRI's WCC crews in the fall and spring field season. Also, the WSRRI Steering Committee invested in some larger equipment to expand the scale of restoration work in coming years. With this equipment in hand, WSRRI can start working with partners and landowners to develop and implement habitat restoration projects at scales of hundreds to thousands of acres.

Wildlife Friendly Fencing

- **Implementation.** 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. WSRRI fencing projects expanded from two (in the 21-23 biennium) to a total of five conservation districts, including Okanogan, Foster Creek, Kittitas, North Yakima, and Eastern Klickitat. Further, with the Washington Conservation Corps (WCC), WSRRI supported retrofits of six miles of fence to wildlife friendly standards; four miles were marked to discourage bird collisions.



Cow collared for management by virtual fence. Photo by Tyler Ung, CNW

- WSRRI is contracting with **Conservation Northwest** to gather information, through surveys and interviews with virtual fence vendors, ranchers, and the WA Utilities and Transportation Commission, to develop recommendations and standards for best practices around ongoing WSRRI investment in virtual fencing. When WSRRI initially invested in virtual fencing, only one vendor was active in the state; with time, multiple vendors have come on-line, with different funding models and technology. WSRRI is seeking information and community feedback to inform development of an action plan for continuing to support application of emerging virtual fencing technology in ways that best support landowners while making best use of public funds.

Research and Education

- Led by WDFW's Grouse and Shrubsteppe Songbird Species Lead, Mike Atamian, and Remote Sensing and GIS Analyst, Vincent Jansen, WDFW is working with **DNR's Wildland Fire Management Division** to test the capabilities of DNR's Multi-Mission Aircraft (MMA) for grouse inventories and shrubsteppe habitat mapping needs.
- WSRRI is so pleased to be able to sponsor 2025's Camp Sagebrush hosted by the **Foster Creek Conservation District**. The camp, open state-wide to grades 5-7th, offers campers opportunities to explore the shrubsteppe with experts, examine water quality, embark on exciting nature hikes, train with wildland firefighters, and learn how to identify native plants and wildlife.



Wild seed collection. Photo by Kurt Merg, WDFW.

Increasing plant material availability

- **Sustainability in Prisons Program (SPP).** We continued our collaboration with the SPP at The Evergreen State College to produce 80,000 sagebrush plugs in state correctional facilities, training and certifying incarcerated people in plant nursery techniques, and providing our partners with locally-adapted plant materials for restoration. In FY26, we will expand production to include forbs.
- **Seed Collection.** WCC crews wild-collected seeds of native plant species with USFWS and BLM's Seeds of Success program. The seed is being cleaned and prepared for grow-out by the USFS Seed Extractory, in Bend, OR. Ultimately, it is slated to produce plants for use in restoration projects in the Columbia Plateau.
- **Seed Storage and Cooling.** Two sites have been secured to hold climate-controlled seed storage containers. Funded by USFWS, we expect to complete installation of the containers in FY26 and storage capacity will be available to partners throughout central Washington. Both sites will be monitored by wireless-enabled temperature sensors.

Are you interested in WSRRI opportunities and resources?

Since WSRRI's inception, we've supported upland shrubsteppe habitat restoration, riparian restoration, wildlife friendly fencing, deferred wildland grazing and species recovery actions. With greater budget clarity coming into the new biennium, the WSRRI Steering Committee anticipates continuing to support these and other projects, through our model of sharing resources and services, including technical assistance, rather than by only distributing funding.



Yakima Canyon. Photo by Janet Gorrell, WDFW.

In July 2025, partners and landowners will be invited to propose projects seeking WSRRI support. If you are interested in WSRRI's opportunities and resources, as a landowner or land manager in support of wildlife, habitat and working lands, we are very interested in hearing about your specific needs and if and how we might assist you in meeting them. We appreciate your engagement in implementing the WSRRI Long-term Strategy, and we'll reach out soon with details and timelines. Janet will be available to assist in answering any questions you may have.

WSRRI Steering Committee

Hannah Anderson, WDFW
Wildlife Diversity Division Manager

h.anderson@dfw.wa.gov

Shana Joy, SCC
Deputy Director of Operations and Programs

sjoy@scs.wa.gov

Allen Lebovitz, DNR
Wildland Fire and Forest Resiliency Liaison

allen.lebovitz@dnr.wa.gov

