

Methow Wildlife Area Advisory Committee Meeting

Final Meeting Notes

May 11, 2023

Methow Conservancy, Winthrop

Attendees

WAAC Members

- James DeSalvo – Methow Valley Trails Collaborative
- Taylor George – Okanogan County Noxious Weed Control Board
- Terry Karro – Citizen/Great Old Broads for Wilderness
- Jasmine Minbashian – Methow Valley Citizens Council
- Cindi Confer Morris – Washington State Parks
- John Rohrer– Citizen, USFS retired
- Vic Stokes – Permittee/Washington Cattlemen’s Association
- Carmen Vanbianchi – Backcountry Hunters and Anglers
- Keith Watson – Conservation Northwest
- Aaron Wold – Okanogan Conservation District
- Julie Grialou – Methow Conservancy
- Matt Young – Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, Fisheries Biologist
- Maddie Eckmann - Yakama Nation, Habitat Biologist

WDFW

- Justin Haug, Okanogan Lands Operations Manager
- Brandon Troyer, Wildlife Area Manager
- Alex Repp, Assistant Wildlife Area Manager
- Lauri Vigue, Project Manager
- Joel Sisolak, Planning, Recreation, and Outreach Section Manager
- Scott Fitkin, District Wildlife Biologist
- Mallory Hirschler, Habitat Program

Welcome and Introductions – Justin Haug

Wildlife Area Update – Brandon Troyer

Restoration – Shrubsteppe restoration -

Forest restoration – staff will complete the prescribed burn on the Ramsey South Unit this fall – need to factor in hunting considerations. The Colville Tribe is willing to help with fire crew staffing.

Sandhill Crains – this is the 3rd year in a row that the cranes have nested, resulting in six colts and one fledgling on the Big Valley Unit. Large dogs must be leashed signs have been installed in multiple locations.

Wolf update – A new pack confirmed in the upper Methow Valley – Chewuch Pack. A minimum of 10 wolves were identified.

Other – 15 miles of fence has been removed by the Backcountry Hunters and Anglers – it’s much appreciated!

Seasonal Closure Proposal – Brandon Troyer

Earth Economics Data shows heavy recreation winter use on the wildlife area. Earth Economics data uses cell phone data to determine where recreationists are occurring on state lands. We currently have data for 2019- 2021. A contract is in the works for data beyond 2021.

Scientific literature from Colorado, Utah and Wyoming all demonstrate disturbance to wintering deer from recreation. Populations have been impacted by fire. Overall populations have a downward trend. Fawn surveys showed the highest numbers in 6 years (2023). There’s a need to determine the population impacts on the landscape level. Literature shows the importance of high quality refugia.

Mule deer are showing a downward trend in the west due to habitat loss, conversion, climate change, disease, and a non-linear increase in recreation on the landscape. Limiting factor is winter. Frasier Creek’s deer population is declining.

General comments:

- How can we enforce the winter closures with lack of enforcement officers? More enforcement needed. Add cameras.
- Monitor use patterns.
- Reach out to private lands program for support.
- More structure will be needed when issuing the closures – where can recreation occur as alternatives?
- Add wildlife impacts to slide presentation (Brandon)
- Educate the public on the value of winter mule deer habitat – honor the original intent of the purchase.
- Unit specific rules will be developed as part of implementation of the recreation plan.

Texas Creek Unit

- Challenging to enforce with surrounding DNR lands. Need to coordinate/ engage with DNR in this discussion.
- Public education is needed.
- Existing trail-based opportunities not impacted. Highest use occurs early in winter, holidays, and weekends.
- Waterfowl hunting would remain open.
- Make the messaging simple/consistent on closure dates.

Golden Doe Unit

- Highest density of mule deer
- Mountain biking use growing/fat tire bike potential
- Limit shed hunting (to be addressed statewide on all WDFW lands)
- Lack of access – having to work with landowners could be an issue – consider providing alternative access with assistance from Private Lands Program.
- Recreation includes waterfowl, upland birds, and predator hunting; snowshoeing, shed antler hunting (March).

Big Buck Unit

- High recreation use, back country skiing at Elbow Creek.
- East side of the unit – prime winter use mule deer (east of Frost Rd.).
- Ongoing closure area around lake – open to fishing, ice skating, hockey (closure will not affect access to the lake)
- Methow Trails interest developing Twisp to Winthrop trail.
- Dogs are an issue on the east side.
- Explore lease options with DNR. With new lease agreement, we may have more options to manage recreation. Designation of a trail that spans both agencies would require negotiation.
- Valuable area for spring/winter range mule deer. They tend to stay in the winter areas longer than expected waiting for green up.

Methow Unit (north)

- Nighttime hiking occurs during full moons.
- High value winter range – recovering fire area.
- State Parks closes state park (parking) in the winter but there is still access for day use.
- Snowmobiles occur on the Ramsey Creek area coming from private lands and USFS.
- Conversations needed with USFS –

- Leave Lloyd Ranch open.

Methow Unit (south)

- Historically this unit has the highest population of mule deer
- Habitat includes shrubsteppe recovery from fire. Replanting's occurred in Frasier Creek in the past.
- Pipestone Canyon/Lester Road – snowshoeing and backcountry skiing have been increasing.
- The 2014 fire impacted deer winter range. What are our management options?
- There are less deer on the upper north section.
- Adding a trail may get people off the road in the winter – safety issues with parking along the roadway.

Rendezvous Unit

- Deer occur in the south near private lands.
- Well-established recreation use.
- Concern about unplanned expansion of recreation.
- Winter range habitat – where deer occur should be protected.
- Lewis Butte/ Riezor Lake historically had mule deer.
- Methow Elders – expressed concerns - the Methow Valley has degraded over time as the local population and visitors have increased. We need to protect our natural resources. The citizens of the Methow Valley must make a choice: whether the remaining ecosystem or the economic benefit of tourism is priority #1.
- South of Gunn Ranch important habitat.
- Elevation and topography considerations – snowshoeing and backcountry skiing – this is the first place that melts out and attracts early spring recreation.

Big Valley Unit

- Emergency closure due to nesting sandhill cranes.
- A new transit option (Twisp to Mazama) opportunity begins in July and improves access to the underserved.
- The new acquisition to the north could provide opportunities – unfortunately it is steep and rocky and has snakes.
- This is not an official Dog Trail.

WAAC Recommendations

Unit	Open/closure	Comments
Texas Creek	Open	Monitor use – over time with potential increased use – option to close in the future is a possibility.
Golden Doe	Partial	2 potential areas to remain open – loop from access area and east of Twisp-Carlton Rd.
Big Buck	Partial	East of Frost Rd (NE) – closure area. Will need more structure (signs, outreach notification to neighbors). Neighbors tend to use the area. Frost Lake would remain open.
Methow North	Partial	East of Chewuch Rd, Lloyd Ranch and Bowen Mtn. excluded from closure.
Methow South	Partial	The closure would occur in the Frasier Creek area.
Rendezvous	Partial	Need to study. Exclude Lewis Butte and Rizeor
Big Valley	Open	
Early Winters	Open	

Commercial Permits- Brandon Troyer

WDFW has a new economist that is engaged in evaluating our commercial permitting process. We are evaluating the current fee structure. We are experiencing a rise in permit requests and the fee should reflect shared risk, they should cover administration and management costs. We'll report back to the WAAC as recommendations come out of the process.

Recreation Survey Results – Lauri Vigue

WDFW conducted a recreation survey from December 2021 through December 2022. The summary report was sent out in the meeting appointment. Highpoints were presented to the Advisory Committee. Copies of the presentation will be sent out to WAAC members.

The agency is also interested in combining user data from local partners. More will be discussed on that topic in coming months.

Next steps –

Agency staff will meet to refine the proposals and prepare for a public workshop to occur late summer/early fall.

Wrap-up – Lauri Vigue

- Agenda topics deferred: Restrictions on non-motorized use, and concerns over expansion of winter trail program
- September field trip – proposed unit closure sites – Rendezvous and Big Buck, forest thinning projects.
- Lauri will send out the Recreation Survey Results presentation to WAAC members
- Lauri will provide Earth Economics data to Methow Trails
- May 22nd Mule deer meeting in Twisp (Justin)