

Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area Advisory Committee (WAAC) Meeting

Monday, April 28, 2014

Davenport Community Hall

511 Park Street

6:30-9:00 pm

INTRODUCTION

Melinda Posner welcomed participants, summarized the agenda, and asked for self-introductions. Thirteen advisory committee members and three members of the public attended the meeting, in addition to the following staff: Lauri Vigue, Wildlife Area (WLA) Planning Project Manager; Juli Anderson, Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area Manager; and Mike Finch, Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area Assistant Manager. A list of participants is included as an attachment.

ROLES & EXPECTATIONS: REVIEW OF ADVISORY COMMITTEE CHARTER

Melinda summarized the draft charter including the purpose of the WAAC being to provide input to the development of the new Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area Plan. WAACs are one tool used by the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) to involve the public in WLA planning. Key WAAC benefits include representing views of varied stakeholder groups, two-way communication with constituents of stakeholder groups, identification of issues and concerns, and provision of local expertise and knowledge.

Melinda listed the responsibilities of WAAC members and staff, noting that both groups expect to work in collaboration. The key responsibilities of the WAAC are to review information, ask questions, provide input and work together to provide collective recommendations to the agency. Key responsibilities of staff are to lead the process, prepare materials and engage the WAAC in discussion about key WLA planning issues. The WAAC is not responsible for making decisions; however, the WAAC can help inform decisions made by the agency. Ultimately, the WDFW Director will approve the plan. Prior to that it will be reviewed at local, regional and headquarters staff levels. The WAAC is not required or expected to reach consensus, however, WAAC agreement on recommendations can potentially carry more weight.

Melinda reviewed discussion guidelines and outlined the schedule for WAAC meetings including a future meeting in June or July to review the draft plan and a final meeting likely in September to provide any final input to the plan. She introduced Lauri Vigue to discuss the overall WLA planning process. Melinda asked if the group had anything to add to the discussion guidelines

or questions about the roles and expectations. She confirmed that an expectation of staff is to distribute WAAC materials in advance of meetings so members have time to review.

WLA PLANNING PROCESS

Lauri outlined the overall purpose and overview of the process including the integration of new agency initiatives such as Wildlife Area Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), Recreation Management Strategy, Ecological Integrity Monitoring, Forest and Road management, and expanded public outreach through newly named Wildlife Area Advisory Committees (WAAC) and public meetings. Lauri described the Overarching Document, which will include information common to all 33 wildlife areas and guidance to staff and the public about how WDFW 's new initiatives will be considered in the planning process. Swanson is the first of four plans that are scheduled to be completed by July 1, 2015. Lauri introduced Juli Anderson to discuss each of the three Swanson Lakes WLA units: Swanson Lakes, Revere and Reardan Audubon Lake.

SWANSON, REVERE AND REARDAN AUDUBON LAKE UNITS OF THE SWANSON LAKES WLA

Juli shared an overview of each area including a proposed new land acquisition that will add 150 acres to the existing Reardan Audubon Lake unit. The WDFW is applying for Recreation Conservation Office (RCO) - Washington Wildlife and Recreation Project (WWRP) funding for Phase 2 Reardan Audubon this year (funding will be determined in 2015).

A description of each area and key issues is summarized here.

Swanson Lakes Unit – Description

- 21,000 acres - shrub-steppe and riparian habitat.
- Critical habitat for sage grouse and sharp tail grouse
- Purpose: Mitigation habitat for sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse and mule deer
- Funding source: Bonneville Power Administration and RCO 1990's, fixed annual BPA funding
- Current objectives: Habitat restoration, grouse translocation

Swanson Lakes Unit – Issues

- Funding sources for ongoing restoration activities
- Grazing (pressure from local landowners and trespass cattle)
- Weed Control – sheer size of this unit requires diligence
- Z-Lake - access and type of fishery

Revere Unit – Description

- 2,291 acres primarily shrub-steppe and Palouse grassland habitat
- Purpose: Mitigation habitat for upland birds/mule deer
- Funding source: Army Corps of Engineers 1992
- Current objectives: Upland birds and mule deer summer range

Revere – Issues

- Hunting management – deer hunters can crowd the unit, but limited entry is not a good solution

Reardan Audubon Lake Unit – Description

- 277 acres - contains wetlands, vernal ponds, Palouse grasslands and channel scablands
- Supports more than 200 species of birds
- Purpose: Preserve upland and waterfowl habitat from urban sprawl, bird watching
- Funding source: Recreation Conservation Office (RCO) 2006
- Current objectives: Access development and habitat restoration

Reardan Audubon Lake Unit – Issues

- Herbicide drift – to and from the unit
- Noise/dust/potholes – visitor traffic vs. south side neighbors
- Restoration complete in 5-10 years, currently considered “weedy” – mostly south side
- South trail beautification – more screen vegetation, signs, benches

WAAC COMMENTS ABOUT WLA ISSUES

The group was asked to identify any additional issues for any of the Swanson Lakes WLA units, and provided the following comments:

Swanson Lakes Unit

- The proposed passive re-hydration project – recharge the Odessa aquifer/groundwater and local water bodies – could affect this area
- Are there other wildlife monitoring activities in addition to sage grouse and sharp tail? Yes, nongame monitoring activities may include amphibians, insects, etc., which the Diversity Division will inform.

- How are the poor habitat conditions of leks addressed? Staff does some mowing, which hasn't made a difference in attracting more grouse to these sites for lekking. **Reardan Audubon Lake Unit**
- City of Reardan has also been dealing with the dust and potholes on the road leading up to the access on the south side; received a grant but had to return funds due to cost of chip seal project; potential for partnering with WDFW to address these issues
- Number of visitors? Not known but could be done through "counter", which was used by the City of Reardan in the past when residents complained of dust and issues associated with WLA visitors. The numbers did not justify action by the City but the City and WDFW may want to consider using a counter to assess number of visitors. There are two geocaches on site; these can be used to assess visitors numbers through geocache website
- What is the main goal of the new property? Phase II acquisition adds important upland Palouse grassland, wetland and vernal pool habitat. Goals include preserving ecological integrity on the site as well as providing watchable wildlife. Generally, the goal is to maintain the new property in its current condition to provide shorebird habitat, and support waterfowl, upland game and birds, consistent with original WLA unit purpose
- City of Reardan has had requests for turtle crossing signs
- This area is underutilized; need to promote to school children and others by offering tours and site visits; Juli confirmed there are annual tours at Swanson Lakes Unit, where kids are exposed to grouse tracking and nature hikes
- More recreation opportunities – including a potential loop trail for walking – was suggested in north area or part of new property
- The location of scopes on the north side pose challenges for good bird viewing
- Additional "duck blind" might be something to consider

DRAFT PLAN OBJECTIVES

Melinda distributed a copy of the Draft Plan Objectives, She noted that staff had started with the objectives identified in the 2006 plan, considered progress since then and any new initiatives or changed conditions. Lauri walked through the objectives and asked for committee comments and questions, which are listed below. Lauri emphasized that these are draft and will be further refined with input from Diversity and Game divisions of the agency.

- Food plots – change "3" to "2"
- EIM – do volunteer hours as Master Hunter count towards complimentary Discover Pass, as the volunteer hours from the EIM project? No, because master hunters receive

some other incentives. Volunteer projects that qualify for the complimentary Discover Pass are included on the agency website volunteer page

- Rare plant surveys, have they occurred on the wildlife area (Swanson's only)? Rare Care has completed surveys on the wildlife area. BLM monitors silene spaldingii on their lands.
- Recreation
 - Reardan loop trail – supported by Reardan City Council and Planning Commission
 - Push for more visitors to access the north side, to reduce impacts to residents on the south, and to distribute folks; however, it's better viewing from the south
 - There are limited "remote, wilderness" sites in eastern WA, especially in desert area; keep it this way and don't make it easier to access, such as drive-in to Z-Lake
 - Z-Lake – improve north and south access with signage and gate design, coordinated and communicated with BLM
 - Good maps are needed – low cost alternative is high-resolution version that can be accessible through web and downloaded and printed by public; possibility of a joint map with Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
 - Web cameras – Can they be used to share grouse and other wildlife with kids in the schools?
 - Upland hunting vs grouse – yes, hunting is allowed except at Reardan Audubon; currently issues of hunters impacting grouse habitat is minima

PUBLIC COMMENT

The following comments/questions were asked by the public:

- Regarding restoration, what level/what successions state/how "natural" is the target the agency is trying to meet? How is "pristine" habitat defined? In context of fire ecology?; Jason Lowe from BLM has been conducting an assessment about and found there has been twice the amount of fire than what is expected – due to human causes and lightning; suggests adding more information about fire ecology in the Wildlife Area Management Plan; BLM is exploring the possibility of additional fuel breaks to stop catastrophic fires.

Melinda asked the group if there were strong opinions about having public comment at the end of the meeting or informally throughout the meeting. The key purpose of the meeting is discussion among committee members. Input from the public and other interested parties can be helpful to committee discussion, and WDFW wants to encourage input from all interested Swanson Lakes Wildlife Area Advisory Committee

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parties. The group agreed that public comment would be accepted throughout the meeting as long as the number of public members wishing to speak did not grow too large. In this case, the group would consider limited public comment.

NEXT STEPS

Staff will circulate a Doodle Poll for the next meeting in June or July. The group agreed that evening meetings starting at 6 p.m. are good.

Members were asked to review the committee roster and make any corrections. An updated version will be distributed to the group along with the final charter.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Agenda
2. Meeting Attendees
3. Advisory Committee Roster – Updated
4. Advisory Committee Charter – Updated
5. Draft Plan Objectives
6. Meeting Presentation