

Director's Report to the Fish and Wildlife Commission

June 6-7, 2008

“A Sound Stewardship of Fish and Wildlife”

We serve Washington's citizens by protecting, restoring and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats, while providing sustainable fish and wildlife-related recreational and commercial opportunities.

Fish and Wildlife Goal:

Achieve healthy, diverse and sustainable fish and wildlife populations and their supporting habitats

Department of Natural Resources (DNR) – WDFW Land Exchange - Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) signed an agreement to move forward with a large-scale land exchange involving property in Kittitas, Chelan, Yakima, and other counties. The exchange will eliminate inholdings within the state's trust lands and wildlife areas, improving management efficiency, and habitat connectivity. Future activities will include state and federal environmental review and the approval of various boards and commissions.

Capital, Planning, and Facilities Management is nearing completion with the Touchet/Dayton project. The facility is completely functional, water is being supplied to the rearing pond, and fish ways are operational. A few punch list items need to be completed to finalize this project. Irrigational access is available, but the installation of a gate valve is expected to improve the process.

Washington Department of Natural Resources Wind Power Proposal - The Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has issued a SEPA Determination of Non-significance (DNS) for the proposed leasing for wind power on 39 DNR-managed (Common School Trust) parcels totaling approximately 19,532 acres for wind power development in eastern Yakima County. DNR has made the same DNS for Columbia, Walla Walla, and Garfield counties totaling an additional 20,000 acres. Cumulatively, these actions relate to the lease of all or parts of more than 87 sections of land totaling 39,377 acres for wind power development. In collaboration with Major Project staff in the Wind Power Division, Region 3 is recommending that a Determination of Significance be issued for this wind power proposal.

Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) Land Acquisition Grant Program - The Heart of the Cascades, Phase I project in Kittitas County was awarded partial funding for acquisition of critical habitat in the Rock Creek sub-basin of the Naches River watershed. Grant applications for cost-sharing through the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program are being submitted for the remainder of the funding for this area. This grant funding would acquire 10,370 acres of timber and riparian habitats in the Rock Creek drainage along the Naches River. Benefits are expected for the northern spotted owl, bull trout, grizzly bear, gray wolf, Canada lynx, and a number of unlisted fish and wildlife species.

Fidalgo Bay Environmental Aquatic Reserve - On April 29, Lands officially established the Fidalgo Bay Environmental Aquatic Reserve. This 650-acre aquatic reserve will protect intertidal fish and wildlife habitats in the Anacortes area. The foundation for this reserve was the acquisition of 532 acres of tidelands from private landowners in the area. Money for the purchases came from two oil spill settlements for natural resource damages. Oil Spill Team personnel worked with other state, federal, and tribal trustees and the Skagit Land Trust to provide funding for these land acquisitions.

Baker River Downstream Fish Passage - Puget Sound Energy has deployed the new \$50 million downstream migrant fish trap, called the floating surface collector (FSC). Pumps generating a flow of 500 cubic feet per second draw fish toward the trap, and nets strung from shore to shore and from surface to reservoir bottom guide the smolts into the FSC. It is already out-performing the old 'gulper' device, and as of May 11, 162,950 smolts have been captured. Captured smolts are transported via truck around Upper and Lower Baker Dams and released into the lower Baker River.

Grays Harbor Wind Power Project in Grayland - Staffs met with representatives of the Coastal Community Action Group (CCAG) at the Grays Harbor Wind Power Project site proposed in Grayland. Other attendees included personnel from Grays Harbor County, Pacific County, and the PUD. The CCAG is proposing to develop a commercial wind power project near Grayland, with the proceeds dedicated to benefit local low-income families. Topics discussed included impacts to the lowland cranberry bogs, impacts to migrating birds, and the large amount of road construction that needs to be done. Initial discussions included changing the proposed tower locations, concerns about the stability of the soils at the project location, and potential mitigation measures. The CCAG is completing pre-project assessment studies and hope that they will have the entire project up and running by the fall of 2009.

Development of a Conservation and Recovery Plan for Rockfish in Puget Sound - On May 9, staff from Intergovernmental Resource Management and the Fish Program met with representatives of several tribes and the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission to discuss the development of a plan to conserve and recover rockfish in Puget Sound. Most of the meeting was spent reviewing the scientific data that will be used to provide the basis for plan development. While no initial concerns were raised, tribal representatives asked for additional time to review the information in depth and agreed to provide comments by the end of June. The Department is also seeking independent scientific peer review of the science basis of the rockfish plan. On May 14, Fish Program staff met with staff from the Habitat Program to begin the public scoping process to develop an EIS. On May 15, Fish Program staff met with representatives of the Puget Sound Partnership to ensure the Partnership was aware of the plan development.

Public Goal:

Ensure sustainable fish and wildlife opportunities for social and economic benefit

2008 Big Game Hunting Regulations - As of May 8, WDFW offices and license dealers were receiving the new 2008 Big Game Hunting Seasons and Regulations pamphlets, the earliest they have ever been available. The pamphlets are available online at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/regs_seasons.html.

Youth Expo Attended - Habitat staff attended the Youth Outdoor Adventure Expo in Tri-Cities and worked at an educational booth informing children about burrowing owls and other important wildlife. In particular, an active burrow site at the Pasco airport was highlighted and can be viewed via the Wildlife's website at: http://wdfw.wa.gov/wildwatch/owlcam/b_owl.html. The weather was great with over 4000 school children visiting the Expo on Friday, showing the importance of these outdoor/natural resource educational events to our youth.

Clam and Oyster Enhancement - Staff planted 300 bags of Pacific oyster "seed" and 200,000 Manila clam seed at West Penn Cove on Whidbey Island. We were assisted in the seeding by Region 4 staff, Washington Sea Grant, Beachwatchers, and local residents. We noted that several upland landowners were growing Pacific oysters in Vexar mesh bags on the public tidelands and we advised them that this practice was illegal.

Willapa Bay Field Station - The annual Willapa Bay Oyster Reserve sale was held on May 13. Industry interest in the tracts was at an all time high, with (a record) seven companies submitting bids for nine oyster picking tracts. All tracts were sold with prices ranging from \$2.07 to \$3.47 per bushel. If earlier estimates of volume per tract hold, this sale should generate around \$240,000. These dedicated funds go to the Fish Program for management of the reserves, to Pacific County to fix failing septic systems in shellfish growing areas in Willapa Bay, and to fund research projects. Picking should begin next week and will continue through August.

Columbia Park Pond (Kennewick) "Fishing Kids" Event - This was the 10th annual "Fishing Kids" event held at Columbia Park Pond (CPP) in Kennewick on Saturday, May 3. Registration was limited to 1,200 kids and the event was sold out a week prior to the deadline. An additional 54 children were registered on-site. CPP is about seven surface acres and the trout are planted directly into the pond as opposed to a net pen. The pond was stocked with over 6,000 catchable trout and 400 jumbos (1 lb. each). Trout were provided by the Department's Naches Hatchery and Trout Lodge. Fishing was above average and the jumbos and triploids (1.5 lbs each, 150 planted a month earlier) made up a significant part of the catch.

Competence Goal:

Implement processes that produce sound and professional decisions, cultivate public involvement and build public confidence and agency credibility

2008 Outdoor Youth Adventure – EXPO - The 2008 Outdoor Youth Adventure was held at the Benton County Fairgrounds on Friday and Saturday, May 15 and 16, and was attended by over 3,000 school children, their teachers, and chaperones. In this year's record hot temperature, with over 80 venues, the children enjoyed an active and fun-filled day exploring outdoor activities. The most popular activities were the canoe/kayak pond, modern archery, bird house building, catch and release fishing, and the pellet gun range.

Cooperative Program with U.S. Army this Summer - The U. S. Army advanced dive team, which is stationed in Virginia, will be spending one month this summer in Puget Sound conducting deepwater training. The Army is interested in combining the training with opportunities for public service. We suggested two opportunities for public service; removal of derelict fishing nets and removal of old tires from Puget Sound. On April 22 and 23, the Army advance team toured Puget Sound and it appears both projects are feasible. The Army will assist in tire removal near Saltwater State Park in King County and with derelict net removal in Deception Pass and the San Juan Islands. Their deepwater, high current dive capacity will expand our efforts into areas and depths that are beyond our capacity. In addition to our Department, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Washington SCUBA Alliance, and the Department of Ecology are involved in tire removal. The Northwest Straits Commission is involved with the net removal. Army operations are planned to start in mid-August.

Science Goal

Promote development and responsible use of sound and objective science to inform decision-making

Mt. St. Helens Elk Mortality Survey - The annual Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area survey was conducted to evaluate winter impacts on elk in the North Toutle valley. Approximately 24 volunteers and 10 agency staff surveyed an area divided into 8 segments. After the data from the individual elk mortality surveys was reviewed and checked for accuracy, the final number of winter elk mortalities on Mt. St. Helen's Wildlife Area was determined to be 158, with the breakdown of age structure for mortalities as follows: 33% calves (52), 17% yearlings (27), 46% adults (72), and 4% (7) unknown. A little under half (48% or 76) of the mortalities were females, 16% (25) males, and 36% (57) were of unknown sex. Most of the unknowns were also classified as calves.

The winter of 2008 was a particularly harsh one with 213-250% of the normal snow pack that was reported. In southwest Washington, reports of elk mortalities were common, especially in the Cascades. The high number of mortalities found on the wildlife area is a good indicator that mortality rates throughout the region were drastically higher this year than in previous years. A big thank-you to all of the volunteers and WDFW employees that helped out with this survey and a special thanks to Representative Ed Orcutt and Representative Brian Blake for lending a helping hand.

Project Cougars and Teaching (CAT) - Research Scientist Gary Koehler and Cle Elum Public School teachers, graduate students, and undergraduate students attended the 9th Mountain Lion Workshop in Idaho. They presented “Cougar spatial and habitat use in relation to human development in central Washington, dynamics and demography of central Washington cougar populations,” and “Project CAT (Cougars and Teaching)...what the community has learned.” The WDFW Mountain Lion research program in Washington was singled out by invited speaker Maurice Hornacher (world renown large carnivore ecologist) at the workshop as an excellent example of how to do it right.

Cherry Valley Pump Monitoring Study - In 2004, the agricultural pump facility at the Cherry Valley Unit of the Snoqualmie Wildlife Area was upgraded to improve fish safety and fish passage for ESA-listed chinook salmon, coho, steelhead, searun cutthroat and resident trout. The Wild Fish Conservancy, in partnership with the Department, Snoqualmie Tribe, Drainage District #7, and NOAA Fisheries, has undertaken a three-year monitoring study of the renovated pump facility at Cherry Valley. A primary purpose of the study is to assess the effectiveness of newly installed Hidrostral (screw impeller) pumps in safely transporting fish from the Cherry Valley floodplain to mainstem Cherry Creek. The new self-regulating tide gate will also be evaluated for fish passage. Because these new types of pumps are being considered for use at other drainage districts in Washington State, the important research being conducted by the Wild Fish Conservancy will provide fish managers and drainage district operators with the best available science for making decisions on permitting, operation, and maintenance of agricultural pump facilities on fish-bearing streams.

Fish Aging in the Columbia River - The Department Fish Aging and Otolith Laboratories, partnering with NOAA Fisheries, University of Washington, and Oregon State University are examining juvenile chinook salmon and their use of the Columbia River Estuary. Otolith microchemistry and daily growth increment analysis is shedding light on juvenile residence times and growth within the lower estuary. Comparisons of contemporary data to historic data within the Columbia River estuary could shed light on how the estuary has changed and how chinook salmon utilize estuarine habitat. Information like this can potentially help managers understand habitat needs and assist in habitat restoration. Additionally, understanding how wild fish behave helps hatchery practices more closely mimic wild life history strategies potentially adding to a population’s resistance to disturbance.