

# Director's Report to the Fish and Wildlife Commission

September 5-6, 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*

**School House Fire Fence:** The School House Fire Fence at the Department's Wooten Wildlife Area in Columbia County is progressing well. The Department is using Correctional Crews to complete the project.

**Cashmere Pond Fish Survey Undertaken To Highlight Major Salmonid Stranding Problems And Important Future Salmonid Rearing Potential:** Habitat Program staff worked with Chelan County Natural Resources program staff on a juvenile fish sampling effort at Cashmere Pond, along the Wenatchee River. The beach seining effort conclusively demonstrated that stranding is a major issue, and also that the project holds considerable value for rearing salmonids. This project is a cooperative effort between the Department, Chelan County, Chelan Public Utility District, and the Washington Department of Transportation (DOT) to create side-channel habitat and connect this former DOT gravel pit pond to the Wenatchee River. The project proposes to use partnered funding, including Salmon Recovery Board dollars, to deepen the pond, construct a lengthy and sinuous ground water rearing channel, and install considerable amounts of large woody debris. The deepened ground water pond and outlet channel are expected to yield significant benefits in off-channel high flow refugia and summering/over-wintering habitat for federally listed endangered summer steelhead, endangered spring chinook salmon, and re-introduced coho salmon in the lower Wenatchee River drainage basin.

**Major Fish Barriers To Be Removed In Order To Open Up Historic Anadromous Salmonid Habitat:** Habitat and Environmental Engineering staff, along with Chelan County Natural Resource Department (CCNRD) and Chelan County Public Works reviewed approximately 10 barrier culverts on Chumstick Creek, a major tributary of the Wenatchee River near Leavenworth. All barrier culverts are to be replaced with new fish-passable full-span bridges. When completed they will, in combination with other important fish passage projects proposed by the CCNRD, allow endangered spring chinook salmon juveniles, endangered summer steelhead trout adults and juveniles, and other important fish to freely enter, spawn, and rear in this important 75 square-mile drainage basin.

**Record Low Ballard Locks Sockeye Counts:** Counts of sockeye at the Ballard Locks indicate that the 2008 return of sockeye to Lake Washington is the lowest since counting began in 1972. The estimated return through the historical count period ending July 31 was 33,630. The return fell far short of the 106,000 forecast for this year. It seems likely that the poor returns are a result of unfavorable ocean conditions.

In contrast to the extremely poor sockeye returns, the chinook counts at the Locks are more encouraging. While the cumulative number at the Locks is down from last year's counts, it is well ahead of the 13-year average. Using the average entry-timing curve, the in-season runsize update for 2008 would be about 17,000. While this is lower than the 2008 forecast and far below last year's record Chinook return of over 30,000, it would still be a strong return to Lake Washington

**Removal of Derelict Tires and Fishing Gear from Puget Sound:** The Fish Program coordinated a multi-agency effort to remove old tires and derelict nets and shellfish pots from Puget Sound during August and September. The agencies involved with this clean-up include the Department of Ecology, the Parks and Recreation Commission, the U.S. Army (both active duty and reserves), as well as the Northwest Straits Commission and the Department.

During the week of August 18, we removed a reef composed of old tires at Saltwater State Park just north of Tacoma. The tires were placed there in the 1970s to improve fish habitat and provide recreational diving opportunity. While it seemed to be a good idea at the time, the reef never performed as planned. Once the tires are removed, the Parks and Recreation Commission plans to replace the reef with another reef constructed from rock and pieces of concrete. We are helping design the new reef.

For the next three weeks, the Army advanced deep-water dive team will remove derelict fishing nets and crab pots in Deception Pass and the San Juan Islands. The Army's dive team has the capacity to remove the derelict fishing gear in deep water and high current areas and the removal would not be possible without their specialized skills and equipment.

**Asotin Creek Designated Intensively Monitored Watershed:** The Snake River Salmon Recovery Board, Regional Fisheries Managers, and NOAA Fisheries have designated the Asotin Creek Watershed an Intensively Monitored Watershed (IMW). The designation will allow researchers to pursue carefully monitoring the effects of habitat manipulations (improvements) on the productivity and abundance of ESA listed summer steelhead in Asotin Creek. The IMW approach is being applied to a small number of river systems in the Pacific Northwest to rigorously evaluate habitat based salmon recovery actions. The intensive monitoring needed to answer questions about the benefits of different types of habitat improvements on fish populations is expensive, so can be conducted in only limited locations. The long history of fish monitoring and habitat improvements in Asotin Creek, as well as currently funded BPA status monitoring, made Asotin Creek a strong candidate for IMW status. The monitoring plan has been completed and the first field data collection is under way. The project is expected to continue for at least 10 years.

**Public Goal:**

*Ensure sustainable fish and wildlife opportunities for social and economic benefit*

**Cucumber and Urchin Buyback Program:** To promote a more even harvest and maintain a sustainable number of cucumber/urchin in the water, a buyback program to reduce the number of cucumber/urchin commercial license holders has been developed. The buyback period for this year began on August 1. The Department's goal is to reduce the number of cucumber license holders from 35 to 25 and urchin license holders from 31 to 25. License holders have until September 1 to apply.

**Make-A-Wish Foundation:** Officers assisted with a project in Seattle involving the “Make-A-Wish” Foundation. An eleven-year-old boy, suffering from a rare form of bone cancer, was given the wish of riding on the Alaskan crabbing vessel “Northwestern.” The Northwestern, and its crew, is part of the popular television show “Deadliest Catch” on The Discovery Channel. Officers participated in the adventure by boarding the vessel as it was preparing to deploy its crab pots in Elliott Bay, and providing gifts to the children on board.

**Marijuana Eradication:**

- 1) Officers participated with the eradication of several marijuana plants from public lands. In the Desert Wildlife Area south of Moses Lake near the Potholes Reservoir officers removed approximately 10,000 plants, 2 tents, a complete kitchen unit, propane tanks, lots of hoses and irrigation pipes and a gasoline generator from a very remote grow site. A combined joint federal/state/local task force, including state Fish and Wildlife Officers have removed approximately 15 marijuana plantations so far this year from public lands located in the Columbia Basin.
- 2) WDFW Officers assisted the Chelan County Sheriff’s Office with the removal of a large marijuana growing operation located on public lands north of Leavenworth. Local law enforcement was extremely pleased with the assistance from our agency. Over 26,000 mature marijuana plants and miles of irrigation lines were removed.
- 3) WDFW Officers joined a team of 60 officers from 8 agencies for pre-dawn raids on a large-scale marijuana grow at the south end of Ross Lake. Despite the manpower on the ground and two helicopters in the air, the resident gardeners were able to escape. Over 16,000 mature plants were eradicated (with an estimated street value of \$48 million) and the National Park Service will now begin the task of rehabilitating the significant environmental damage done by the grow sites.

**Wild Horse Wind Power Project:** Major Projects staff provided comments for a Site Certification Agreement Amendment to authorize expansion of the existing Wild Horse Wind Power Project. Staff expects the proposed Wild Horse Expansion (Expansion) would have environmental impacts similar to that of the original Wild Horse Wind Power Project, with the exception of four turbines. The construction of the four most eastern turbines have potential to cause environmental impact that could degrade the wildlife habitat value of the adjacent wildlife area. The four most eastern turbines are isolated from the rest of the project by a deep drainage and by property ownership. Access to these four turbines also requires crossing of the Department’s Quilomene Wildlife Area, widening of the road, and installation of an aerial cable. Staff is reviewing mitigation alternatives for the expansion as well as assessing whether a Supplemental EIS on the environmental impacts of the four most eastern turbines on wildlife is necessary, particularly with respect to impacts associated with the Quilomene Wildlife Area. Staff will be meeting with Puget Sound Energy soon to discuss mitigation alternatives to avoid impacts of the expansion.

**Emergency Bank Stabilization on the South Fork Skykomish River:** Habitat staff have been working actively with the landowners, their engineer, and King County to permit an emergency bank stabilization project along the South Fork of the Skykomish River in eastern King County. A previously installed riprap wall was undermined and failed during the December 3<sup>rd</sup> storm of last year. The eroding bank is a chronic environmental problem that has failed at least once before. The property owners proposed to rebuild the riprap wall. Habitat staff were able to mitigate the impacts to fish life by working with the engineer to

install large woody debris and lay the wall back. All parties are aware that this may be a temporary fix that will once again be undermined by the action of the river. The County has been actively promoting a buyout program for the homeowners.

### **Funding Goal**

*Ensure effective use of current and future financial resources in order to meet the needs of Washington State's fish and wildlife resource for the benefit of the public.*

**Operating and Capital Budgets:** The Operating and Capital Budget Requests for the 09-11 Biennium were submitted to the Office of Financial Management (OFM) August 29, 2008, which includes a ten-year plan for 2009-19.

**Increased Recreational License Sales:** The Licensing Division is finalizing the recreational license sales reports for FY08. In FY08, sales were \$33.5 million, up by 0.8% (\$33.2 million) from FY07.

**Efficient Dealer Training:** The Licensing Division is looking into providing dealer training via the phone, rather than an in-person visit by a dealer representative. Benefits to this approach include reduced travel costs and staff overtime. Initial reviews of a test case with a new dealer who was trained solely over the phone have shown that the dealer was adequately trained and able to sell WDFW licenses effectively. The division is now creating a manual that will be used to train dealers over the phone.

**Improved After Hours Support:** Licensing supervisors have been on-call each weekend to address WILD system issues after hours. The division is testing a new text messaging system so operators needing assistance from the Department can text the on-call Licensing supervisor. Previously, supervisors needed to be close to their computers and regularly check email messages while on-call. Text messaging, once activated, will provide supervisors the information to determine whether or not they need to intervene and/or escalate the issue to Outdoor Central immediately. It is expected that this new process will lead to reduced overtime charges to the agency.

**Grant for Fish Science Researchers:** Fish Science researchers have received an approximate \$75,000 grant to focus on redband trout, the resident form of *Oncorhynchus mykiss* above anadromous barriers. These federal funds are provided through the Western Native Trout Initiative (WNTI). The project has three components: 1) testing out various protocols so that we can recommend a basic protocol for statewide monitoring and evaluation, 2) coordinating with the Colville Confederated Tribes and the Spokane Tribe of Indians to assess historic and current redband distribution in the Washington State area, and 3) developing maps that show where we need to look for presence or absence of redbands. Information from this project will be presented at a multi-agency redband trout workshop to be held this winter that will include states and tribes from Idaho, Oregon, California, Nevada, and Montana as well as Washington. This work is expected to provide the foundation for future evaluations such as genetic analysis and population size estimation.

### **Competence Goal:**

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

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### **Science Goal**

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

**Mt. St. Helens Elk:** Department staff met to discuss methods of Mt. St. Helens Elk herd population assessment through the potential development of a sightability model. This model would offer an improved way of predicting the sighting probability of elk using factors such as group size and vegetation during helicopter surveys, and would eventually provide a better estimate of population size. The most immediate result of this discussion is that the flights for the 2008 Mt. St. Helens elk surveys will be made in the winter instead of the fall.

**Update of the PHS List:** The Department recently completed a comprehensive revision to its list of Priority Habitats and Species (PHS). The PHS List is the Department's primary catalog of species and habitats of conservation and management concern. For nearly two decades, PHS information has been a primary resource used in the conservation and protection of Washington's fish and wildlife resources by landowners, cities, counties, and state and federal agencies. Major revisions included changes to the list of priority species, definitions used to identify priority habitats, county-specific distribution maps for every priority species and habitat, embedded links to publications that are useful for the management of priority species and habitats, and improvements to make it easier for readers to navigate the list. An advisory group composed of specialists having a broad range of expertise oversaw all major changes. More specialized groups guided the development of definitions for specific priority habitats. The update of the PHS List concluded with a peer-review where roughly 70 reviewers provided comments. The entire update from beginning to end was thoroughly documented to ensure that anyone can track each and every revision. The list will primarily be an online resource. A coordinated outreach is underway to ensure that users are able to readily obtain the latest version of the PHS List.

### **Employee Goal**

*Create an agency environment that nurtures professionalism, accountability, enthusiasm, and dedication in order to attract, develop, and retain a workforce that can successfully carry out the mandate of the agency.*

**Region 4 and 6 Office Buildings Contracts:** The Region 4 public works contract has been awarded and work has begun for replacing the roof of the regional office building. The contract for the Region 6 roof replacement has also been awarded.