



MOUNT ST. HELENS WILDLIFE AREA 2007 MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Land Management Summary

This is an update to the 2006 Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area Management Plan

(http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/pdfs/mt_st_helens_plan.pdf) that provides

management direction for the Mt. St. Helens State Wildlife Area Complex including the 2,744-acre Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area in Cowlitz County Washington and numerous smaller “satellite” wildlife areas totaling 1,198 acres located in Skamania, Clark, Cowlitz, Lewis, and



Wahkiakum Counties. The plan identifies needs and guides activities on the area based on the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Mission of “*Sound Stewardship of Fish and Wildlife*” and its underlying statewide goals and objectives as they apply to local conditions.

Plans are updated annually as habitat and species conditions change, new regulations and scientific knowledge develop, as public issues and concerns evolve, and administration of wildlife areas change. This management plan update also includes 2006 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies, and performance measures for 2007.

Updates/Changes

In 2006 several changes occurred that will effect future management of the Wildlife Area. In the spring a multi-year effort to establish trees and shrubs along the erosion prone edge of the remaining mudflow was completed.

Unfortunately, record rainfall in November caused floods, river shifts, and erosion that erased the vast majority of this work. The Wildlife Area Manager wrote a grant application to do further work to stabilize the river and the mudflow that is likely to be funded in 2007.

Inside

Land Management Summary	1
Updates/Changes	1
New Issues	2
Major Stewardship Accomplishments	3
Status Report of 2006 Performance Measures	3
New Strategies	5
2007 Performance Measures	6
Citizens Advisory Group Input	6

The November storm was the beginning of early winter conditions that raised concern that elevated levels of winter mortality could be possible among the elk wintering in the valley. Two measures were initiated to address the situation, as elk numbers on the Wildlife Area were higher than normal as well. Three special hunts involving twenty-five disabled hunters were adopted under an emergency rule to harvest some of the elk and the agency declared emergency conditions existed; warranting implementation of an emergency winter-feeding operation for the winter, which began in early 2007. It is important to note that winter-feeding is not viewed by the agency as a measure that should be used on this wildlife area long-term and the decision in 2006 was based on conditions at the time and does not necessarily indicate that feeding will occur in subsequent years.

In conjunction with the Wildlife Area Plan, the Mt. St. Helens Elk Herd Plan was also completed in 2006. This plan called for a new direction by recommending a reduction in herd numbers due, in part, to habitat and social changes in the herd's range. Implementation of this plan will result in significantly expanded elk hunting opportunities in the wildlife area and surrounding lands.

The Wildlife Area Manager also worked with members of the local Toutle community with regards to the future of one of the satellite areas on Silver Lake. The property in question, once used as a youth baseball field, is on WDFW's surplus property list. In our meetings we learned that the site, and adjoining larger WDFW owned lands, had been used by many years by the school district as an outdoor classroom to teach students the characteristics and values of different wetland plant communities. The manager and Regional Lands Agent have been working with the local group to assess the potential of an agreement or land transfer to the school district or local entity, which would preserve and enhance the value of the property to the community for the purpose of wildlife habitat and education.

New Issues

Elk winter mortality in and around the Mt. St. Helens State Wildlife Area drew a great deal of public attention and media coverage. Sixty-three winter mortalities were counted during the course of several surveys on the wildlife area, which was the second highest total since formal monitoring began in 1999. The outfall of this attention led to significant changes in management of the Wildlife Area and the Elk Herd. The new direction of the Elk Herd plan is to reduce the herd's size from approximately 12,500 to 10,000 animals. This objective in turn will lead to increased hunting on the wildlife area. Two measures were added to the wildlife area plan that address harassment of elk on the wildlife area, which include closing the area to public access from December, 1 through April, 30 each year and prohibiting dogs on the wildlife area at all times. The winter monitoring protocol that had been used in the past was also changed to include only one ground search for winter mortalities in April each year. This also was in recognition that human presence on the wildlife area during the critical winter period needs to be reduced to benefit wintering elk on the site. Obtaining a satisfactory level of compliance with the winter closure and dog prohibition will be a challenge in 2007.

An Assistant Manager was hired for the Shillapoo Wildlife Area that is part of the complex under the Wildlife Area Manager. The new employee has at times been able to assist with projects on the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area during the past year due to budget variances caused

by vacancies in other positions. However, no long-term funding exists for salaries on the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area other than the Manager.

Increased hunting effort during the December seasons in 2006 resulted in significant damage to the road on the wildlife area that can be traveled in a standard vehicle. Further damage has occurred in early 2007 due to daily use during winter-feeding. Most of the road's length is only a graded track with no crushed rock on the surface. Maintenance will be required to better drain excessive water from the roadway to minimize impacts from increased hunting pressure and other traffic during the wet seasons. Previously vehicle use on the roadway during these times of year had been minimal.

Major Stewardship Accomplishments

Initial meetings between WSDOT and WDFW identified incremental steps to complete the transfer of 4,000 acres of land to WDFW to become a part of the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area.



Volunteers planting willow cuttings

With a successful implementation of these steps, the transfer of lands should occur in late 2007 or early 2008.

Scotch Broom control was completed on over 250 acres of land including a site of one of the worst infestations. This unanticipated level of control was only achieved with volunteer time and additional help from the WDFW spartina weed crew. Most of this work used the same approach that had been followed in recent years by beginning at the eastern boundary of the wildlife area with the National Volcanic Monument and working west. Each year as the weed density is reduced in the treated area, we have been

able to progress further west each year and have now reached the halfway point on the main portion of the mudflow.

We were able to surpass our minimum goal of treating 50 acres to increase forage production and nutritional value. Through the financial assistance from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, treatments were applied to 125 acres in areas that had been identified to manage as intensive forage management areas. All of this acreage was fertilized and about thirty of those acres received lime at a rate of 100 pounds per acre. Elk foraging activity in these areas was noticeably heavier than in untreated areas.

Status Report of 2006 Performance Measures

Key performance measures are identified each year to monitor progress and identify any issues that might interfere with planned priority activities. This information will be used to delete, add, or alter priority strategies for 2007.

2006 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2007 Related Activity/ Comments
Identify “Intensive Forage Management Areas” (IMA’s) and improved prescriptions for forage enhancement based upon soil tests and other monitoring.	A total of five initial IMA’s have been identified where soil samples have been collected and submitted for analysis. New prescriptions will be applied to these areas within funding limitations in 2007.	Several smaller sites are being considered where ground based management practices are possible. Two potential areas for forage expansion will be sampled in 2007 in anticipation of volunteer and other grants.
50 acres of intensive treatments to enhance elk forage annually utilizing some or all of the following techniques: Mowing, harrowing, liming, over-seeding, and fertilizing.	One hundred twenty-five acres were fertilized and thirty of those acres received an initial lime treatment.	RMEF funds allowed us to do more work than our operating budget allows.
Initiate the DOT land transfer. Action required by both WSDOT and WDFW Real Estate Programs.	Staffs from WDFW and DOT Real Estate Programs have been in contact and progress is being made on the transfer.	The manager will continue to monitor progress and assist as necessary.
Provide current level hunting opportunities for disabled hunters and work with the District Wildlife Biologist to evaluate if increased opportunity can or should be provided within the context of the Mt. St. Helens Elk Herd Plan and habitat limitations.	Two hunts for disabled hunters occurred in November as had occurred in the past. In addition, three special hunts were held in December due to high numbers of elk early in the winter.	Opportunity for disabled hunters will increase in 2007 and new opportunities for Youth and Seniors will be provided.
Implement measures over a two-mile area that includes, at a minimum, seeding and tree planting to lessen the risk of further major losses of riparian and elk forage habitat due to river avulsions/erosion and leading toward long-term improvement in anadromous fish habitat in the Toutle River.	Tree and Shrub plantings occurred over a three-mile area in the spring of 2006. These plantings and work that had been done in previous years was severely damaged during severe rainstorms in November. Some areas where trees and other vegetation were better established remain largely intact.	Replanting will begin in 2007 and there is a likelihood that additional work may begin to place large wood along the bank to further secure and stabilize the river and its floodplain.

Control a minimum of 40 acres of Scotch Broom and other noxious weeds on the wildlife area.	Scotch broom control efforts covered an area in excess of 250 acres. The increased effort was primarily through the help of the WDFW spartina control crew. A good level of control was achieved at the two known knapweed infestations.	We anticipate help again from the spartina crew and probably exceeding the 40-acre minimum again in 2007. Scotch broom presence is declining within the wildlife area. Some of the 2007 work will focus in the IMA's that were established in 2006.
Provide better information materials about the wildlife area that are readily available to the public in the form of a fact sheet or pamphlet and signage at various locations around the site.	This work is deferred to 2007.	This work was not completed due primarily to limited staff time available due to a vacancy in the regional program.
Evaluate the wildlife habitat and human access needs on the satellite units of the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area located in the vicinity of Silver Lake and the town of Toutle. (Gardner, Hall Road, Canal Road, Carnine)	We attended a meeting with representatives from the local community and discussed the four properties in question. The primary interest was with the portion of the Hall road unit that once was used as a youth baseball field that has been considered a surplus property by WDFW.	Options are being explored with regards to development of a cooperative agreement for management of the site or a land transfer that would allow use of the site as an outdoor classroom and wildlife-viewing site.
Complete plan and annually update.	The management plan was completed and the update will occur in 2007.	

New Strategies

The wildlife area plan identifies many strategies or activities to address the agencies strategic plan goals and objectives, why the area was purchased, habitat conditions, species present, and public issues and concerns. The following updated strategies have been added to respond to previously unaddressed or new issues or changes on the wildlife area. New strategies may also be in response to adaptive management as staff evaluate the impacts of past management activities.

Issues identified in italics were provided by the Citizens Advisory Group. These public comments are captured at the end of this document. Although underlined strategies have no current funding source, identifying these needs is the first step to securing additional funds.

No new strategies are proposed at this time.

2007 Performance Measures

Performance measures for the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area are listed below. Accomplishments and progress toward desired outcomes will be monitored and evaluated annually.

- 1) Implement strategies in the plan that prohibit public use from December 1 through April 30 and dogs at all times on the wildlife area. Post rules, monitor compliance, and seek support from WDFW's enforcement program.
- 2) Complete 50 acres of intensive treatments within identified "Intensive Forage Management Areas" (IMA's) to enhance elk forage utilizing some or all of the following techniques: Mowing, harrowing, liming, over-seeding, and fertilizing. Identify other sites with potential for intensive ground based management.
- 3) Continue to monitor progress made on the WDOT land transfer process to acquire lands by 2008. Action required by both WSDOT and WDFW Real Estate Programs.
- 4) Continue to work with the District Wildlife Biologist to monitor expanded hunting opportunities within the wildlife area and make adjustments as necessary.
- 5) Implement measures over a two-mile area that includes, at a minimum, seeding and tree planting to lessen the risk of further major losses of riparian and elk forage habitat due to river avulsions/erosion and leading toward long-term improvement in anadromous fish habitat in the Toutle River.
- 6) Assuming grant funds are secured, begin work to plan, permit, and implement the placement of engineered streambank protection measures to further stabilize the remaining mudflow and Toutle River floodplain.
- 7) Control a minimum of 40 acres of Scotch Broom and other noxious weeds.
- 8) Provide better information materials about the wildlife area that are readily available to the public in the form of a fact sheet or pamphlet and signage at various locations around the site.
- 9) Seek approval from Weyerhaeuser to place improved information boards at the three primary locations used to access the Wildlife Area. Post pertinent information and advisory of wildlife area rules so that users will be aware of rules before they arrive on the wildlife area.
- 10) Continue to work with local constituents to resolve the future use of the surplus portion of the Hall Road property.

Citizens Advisory Group Input

A Citizens Advisory Group meeting was held on June 6th, 2007 to review management progress and address any new issues or input on existing issues. Those in attendance included representatives from Willapa Hills Audubon, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Cowlitz Game and Anglers, Toutle School District, Friends of Harry Gardner Park, Weyerhaeuser, and Backcountry Horsemen.

The following new input/issues were addressed at the meeting.

Issue: An issue was raised regarding the DOT land transfer, which includes the sediment retention area. The question was asked with regard to who is responsible for "maintaining" the sediments, as this is a source of turbidity in the river. A group member pointed out that agreements between the federal and state governments from the early 1980's indicate that this is the state's responsibility, but does not define what the maintenance should entail.

Response: At the current time this responsibility probably rests with the Department of Transportation at least until the land is transferred to WDFW. To the best of our knowledge, no action has been taken by DOT or any other party to attempt to manage the sediments deposited in the retention area. Once the property is transferred, WDFW will then be able to make improvements to the site. At the current time we believe that establishing vegetation is the most important aspect in managing the sediments and restoring both fish and wildlife habitat in the sediment retention area.

Issue: During the discussion of road damage caused by increased traffic during the fall and winter, a concern was raised that sediments from the roadway could enter streams.

Response: At the current time we do not believe that any significant siltation directly into streams has occurred. However, we will be taking measures to minimize that risk in anticipation of increased hunting effort during the fall. This would include erosion control seeding, water bars at appropriate locations, and addition of gravel in areas where needed.

Issue: A request was made that we increase the focus on some of the satellite areas, particularly those near Silver Lake. A related comment was brought up that local individuals or groups could act as stewards on some of these areas in a similar way that WDFW's adopt an access program works.

Response: We have made an effort to engage the Toutle community with regards to the satellites units in that area. This was a new initiative in 2006 and we continue to work to build partnerships to benefit wildlife habitat and related public use on those sites. The idea of having site stewards, particularly at sites where our management time and resources are minimal, has merit. As we further develop plans for these sites, we will look for these opportunities.

Issue: A brief discussion concerning winter-feeding raised some differences in the group. One stated that if we want to reduce herd numbers we should not feed elk and perhaps the group should make a statement to that effect. Others stated that they felt we should keep emergency winter-feeding as a management tool for severe situations and that it is more efficient to hunt the elk than it is to feed them.

Response: We recognize that feeding may be seen as counter to the herd reduction goal and we do see it as a short-term measure on this site to address weather conditions, habitat capacity, and public sentiment. Emergency winter-feeding is a management tool that could be employed again if conditions warrant, but there are no current plans for feeding on this wildlife area in the future. The Mt. St. Helens Elk herd plan does call for increased hunting opportunity to reduce the herd's numbers and adjust to changes in habitat.

Issue: A statement was made that WDFW should work with the Department of Natural Resources on enhancements. The context was with regard to elk forage.

Response: The bulk of this state forestland was replanted shortly after the eruption and similar conditions are present as with private forestlands in the area. Thinning or early harvest would be

options to improve conditions and, as was pointed out by another group member; DNR, like Weyerhaeuser, has begun some harvest in those areas. A step that we will try to take in the coming year is to invite DNR to participate as a member of the advisory group, an offer that they have previously declined. Other WDFW staff within the Game division will be looking for opportunities to enhance elk habitat throughout the Mt. St. Helens elk herd range.

Issue: Regarding the performance measure to develop improved informational materials for the wildlife area that was deferred to 2007, a suggestion was made that this could be a good school project.

Response: This is a suggestion that we will attempt to pursue by providing an opportunity as a senior project or similar school related requirement.

Issue: A question was asked as to whether we had made any progress on developing trails for horseback or other uses.

Response: We have not attempted to pursue this yet. This is largely because the routes suggested by the advisory group before would involve routes on lands not controlled by WDFW. We do recognize that trails may be safer for horseback riders in particular and that they could be used to direct use in a way that could lessen wildlife disturbance. We do plan to address this in the future and the prospect of the DOT land transfer may expand the options that we would have available to provide an appropriate experience.

At the conclusion of the meeting, another CAG meeting was tentatively scheduled for September.

Want to see the full plan?

Go to -

http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/pdf/s/mt_st_helens_plan.pdf

Contacts:

WDFW Vancouver Office
(360) 696-6211
Wildlife Area Manager
(360) 906-6725