



MOUNT ST. HELENS WILDLIFE AREA 2008 MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Land Management Summary

This is an update to the 2007 Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area Management Plan

(http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/) 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, as new regulations and scientific knowledge develop, as public issues and concerns evolve, and as administration of wildlife areas change. This management plan update also includes 2007 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies, and performance measures for 2008.

Updates/Changes

In 2007 several events or changes occurred that will effect future management of the Wildlife Area. Heavy rains once again damaged erosion control plantings and caused erosion along the edge of the mudflow in December. We did receive a grant award to install structures along the edge of the mudflow that will help ensure the success of future planting efforts and protect the winter range. If permitting and other preparations go well, construction could begin in 2008. The Cowlitz Tribe also received a grant from the Department of Ecology to do similar work.

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By contracting with the Lower Columbia River Fisheries Enhancement Group, the project construction was completed in December 2007.

A volunteer also received a grant through WDFW's volunteer cooperative grants program to rehabilitate approximately 50 acres of forage area that had significantly declined in production. This work started in the fall but will not be fully complete until 2008. The wildlife area manager utilized the funding in this grant as matching funds for a second project to rehabilitate another 20-acre site.



Winter-feeding occurred for the first time

Emergency winter-feeding was conducted on the wildlife area for the first time beginning in January due to early winter conditions, a high number of elk on the site, and recognition of public concern. Feeding continued into mid-April. It is notable that after the early severe conditions the winter turned out to be relatively mild and a total of 18 winterkill elk were found in the annual survey. Although outside of this reporting period, it is noteworthy that WDFW again decided to implement emergency winter-feeding in the 2007-08 winter due to high numbers of elk and extreme winter conditions. This winter

turned out to be one of the most extreme in over 20 years and, although we have not yet completed the mortality survey, it is already known that the mortality count is expected to be the highest since surveys began in 1999. 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 decisions to feed in 2007 and 2008 were based on conditions at the time and seen as a stopgap measure. It does not necessarily indicate that feeding will occur in subsequent years.

New Issues

One of the new measures identified in the wildlife area plan to address harassment of elk on the wildlife area was to close the area to public access from December, 1 through April, 30 each year. This 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 was a challenge in 2007, particularly late in the winter. During this time elk behavior made it obvious that a group of individuals was entering and combing the area for shed antlers on almost a weekly basis, at times running all of the elk off of the winter forage area. In order to at least partially remove this incentive, WDFW decided to pick up shed antlers incidental to other work on the site, including winter-feeding. All employees were given the direction to not make special efforts to search for the cast antlers, as this would potentially have the same impact as we were attempting to discourage. Although some violations have occurred, this appears to have helped in reducing the number of occurrences.

As part of our herd reduction effort, WDFW increased hunting opportunity on the site to include ten hunts with six hunters in each group. Although intended to dramatically increase harvest, the result was not as we had hoped. Through preliminary reporting, we believe the 60 permit holders that included youth, seniors, and disabled persons harvested approximately 22 elk. We feel that the pressure from this level of hunting effort in combination with mild weather was sufficient to keep elk off of the site and outside the legal hunting area. As a result of the lower than expected success rates, the current 2008 proposal is to reduce the number of hunts and number of hunters in each group. This will provide a rest period between hunts and is hoped to increase the number of animals harvested.

Two land transfers have been moving forward, which would add additional lands to the complex. The first, called Eagle Island, lies partially in Clark and Cowlitz Counties. This property includes the 259-acre Eagle Island, which lies in the North Fork Lewis River and an associated 20-acre mainland parcel on the South Bank. This property was acquired some years ago through a partnership with Clark County with the ultimate intent of transferring the site to WDFW. The Island was acquired due to its importance as salmon rearing habitat. Future known maintenance and enhancement needs include scotch broom control and riparian enhancement along the south shore of the island. WDFW is working with the Lower Columbia Fish Recovery Board and others in seeking funding for a project to study the need for further enhancement work on the site to benefit listed fish.

The second transfer includes the WSDOT lands associated with the US Army Corps of Engineers sediment retention project downstream of the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area. This transfer identified in the management plan has progressed to the point of a draft deed, which was reviewed by WDFW. The deed was returned to WSDOT with comments. The primary concern was an apparent error in the legal description of the property. With continued cooperation on the part of WSDOT, this transfer could be completed in 2008. The anticipated addition of this property to the wildlife area provides a number of new opportunities in terms of wildlife enhancements and public recreational opportunities. In 2008 we plan to begin identifying and potentially implementing specific tasks and strategies to be added to the management plan to begin managing this property. See sections on New Strategies and Citizens Advisory Group Input below for more detail.

Major Stewardship Accomplishments



New cages designed to protect seedlings

As noted above, WSDOT and WDFW have made substantial progress toward completing the transfer of the approximately 4,000 acres situated immediately downstream of the current wildlife area. In addition to offering the opportunity to expand recreational opportunities and available elk winter range habitat, this area gives us the opportunity to provide a wider diversity of habitat for other species and, by working with other agencies and groups, improve conditions for fish in particular.

Scotch Broom control was completed on at least 250 acres of land including, for the second year, one of the worst infestations which is now almost under control. This level of control, beyond that identified as funded in the plan, was again achieved with 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 passed the halfway point on the main portion of the mudflow. Two of the areas identified for intensive management of elk forage further west also received additional weed control.



Sediments accumulated behind pile structures

As already mentioned, the first engineered stabilization project was completed in December. The project included installation of three structures built by driving log piles into the substrate to deflect the river's flow away from the eroding bank and accumulate sediment behind them. The project has worked as intended and has provided areas suitable for planting riparian and forage plants in the accumulated sediments.

A variety of forage management treatments were applied to five areas ranging in size from one to 20 acres. An estimated 60 acres were treated with either

lime or fertilizer in the spring and 20 acres received a fertilizer treatment in the fall. About 27 acres were harrowed prior to lime applications to disperse elk droppings and loosen thatch or moss to improve production. The road on the mudflow was also harrowed and reseeded with a forage/stabilization mix following the conclusion of winter-feeding, which equates to a potential ten acre forage area, and a two acre area that had silt deposited on it during high river flows in 2006 was reseeded with forage plants.

Status Report of 2007 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 2008.

2007 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2008 Related Activity/ Comments
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<p>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.</p>	<p>Compliance with these rules has been relatively good in general. However, serious violations of the winter closure are known to have occurred in March and April.</p>	<p>We will continue to monitor and attempt to improve compliance through improved information and cooperation with WDFW's enforcement program.</p>
<p>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, overseeding, and fertilizing. Identify other sites with potential for intensive ground based management.</p>	<p>Approximately 60 acres received lime and/or fertilizer treatments.</p>	<p>We intend to continue this work. Increases in material costs may eventually lead to a reduction in the acreage we can treat.</p>
<p>Continue to monitor progress made on the WSDOT land transfer process to acquire lands by 2008. Action required by both WSDOT and WDFW Real Estate Programs.</p>	<p>Progress has been made and we still hope to complete the transfer in 2008.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>
<p>Continue to work with District Wildlife Biologists to monitor expanded hunting opportunities within the wildlife area and make adjustments as necessary.</p>	<p>Ten hunts occurred in 2007, which appears to have been too intensive of an effort and reduced success.</p>	<p>The number of hunts and permits will be reduced in 2008. This is intended to increase the number of elk harvested.</p>

<p>Implement measures over a 2-mile area that include, 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.</p>	<p>About 2 ½ miles were seeded. 2000 red alder were planted over a 2-mile area. 100 pacific ninebark, 200 sitka alder, 100 western red cedar, and 50 grand fir were planted in the western portion of the target area.</p>	<p>Ongoing erosion late into April limited establishment and heavy rainfall in December again eroded some of the plantings.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>Grant funds were received from two separate sources. A successful pilot project was completed in December.</p>	<p>Design for the larger grant project is now under way and the project may be constructed this year.</p>
<p>Control a minimum of 40 acres of Scotch Broom and other noxious weeds.</p>	<p>Control occurred on 270 acres, primarily at the eastern end of the mudflow.</p> <p>Knapweed infestations have been significantly reduced. Only two plants were found.</p>	<p>Continue work in 2008.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>A prototype layout was prepared for a flyer but work was not completed.</p> <p>Outdated signage was replaced and upgraded at the east end of the wildlife area.</p>	<p>Continue work in 2008.</p>
<p>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.</p>	<p>We received initial approval to install better signboards but need to submit more detailed plans.</p>	<p>Continue work in 2008.</p>

Continue to work with local constituents to resolve the future use of the surplus portion of the Hall Road property.	A site meeting was held in the spring. Agreed to pursue site cleanup only until surplus issue is resolved.	Formalize agreement with school and other stakeholders in 2008.
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New Strategies

The wildlife area plan identifies many strategies or activities to address the agency’s 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. The 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.

Strategy: Upon completion of the WSDOT land transfer, or prior to under agreement, begin trials to determine the most effective techniques to establish beneficial vegetation that reduces the sediment impacts to the watershed, provides for stream stability, and improves habitat for fish and wildlife.

2008 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) 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.
- 2) Continue to monitor progress made on the WSDOT land transfer process to acquire lands by 2008. Action required by both WSDOT and WDFW Real Estate Programs.
- 3) Continue to work with District Wildlife Biologists to provide effective and enjoyable hunting opportunities within the wildlife area and make adjustments as necessary.
- 4) 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.
- 5) Continue work to plan, permit, and implement the placement of engineered streambank protection measures to further stabilize the remaining mudflow and Toutle River floodplain.
- 6) Control a minimum of 40 acres of Scotch Broom and other noxious weeds.
- 7) Continue to work toward providing 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. Also make the information and materials available to others that provide interpretative information in the area.

- 8) Formalize the approval from Weyerhaeuser to place improved information boards at the three primary locations used to access the Wildlife Area and install. (Assumes materials can be purchased within available budget) Post pertinent information and advisory of wildlife area rules so that users will be aware of rules before they arrive on the wildlife area.
- 9) 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 April 23rd, 2008 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, Weyerhaeuser, Backcountry Horsemen, Mt. St. Helens Preservation Society, US Forest Service, and Toutle Valley Community Association.

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

Issue: The Wildlife Area Manager posed the following question to the group: “Should the winter range closure of the current wildlife area be extended to the lands currently under the ownership of WSDOT when they are transferred to WDFW?”

It appeared to be a consensus that the closure should not automatically apply to this area when it is acquired. Under the current conditions, elk concentrations are not as high here and they have more cover available. The area also does not attract as many people.

Response: We will propose that geographic or other features that can be readily recognized be used to define the boundary for the closure when the land is acquired. This would make the closure area either slightly smaller or larger. If larger it would include only a small portion of the new land area but would provide us with a better mechanism to define the closure area to the public by providing a line that can easily be understood on the ground.

Issue: The Wildlife Area Manager posed the following question to the group: “Should WDFW plan to harvest trees from within the lands currently under the ownership of WSDOT when they are transferred to WDFW? Harvest may improve conditions for big game and could be done in such a manner as to create more natural forest conditions. Logs could also be used for stream enhancement and stabilization projects on the wildlife area.”

The group generally supported this as a management option particularly if it was done with the intent of improving habitat conditions.

Response: We will keep this open as a management option and, as time permits, begin to identify specific areas where harvest would be beneficial or appropriate.

Issue: The Wildlife Area Manager posed the following question to the group: “Should WDFW maintain and improve existing open areas for elk forage habitat within the lands currently under WSDOT ownership when they are transferred to WDFW?”

The group felt that this would be an appropriate measure and related directly to existing high priority issues on the existing wildlife area lands with regard to identified priorities in the elk herd plan.

Response: We will plan to maintain these areas to the extent that funding supports. This will also broaden the scope of at least one strategy in the current plan that we will be recommending additional funding. Because of the existing conditions of the soils, it may be easier to maintain these areas for forage production than some of the sites on the existing wildlife area, but because of current migration patterns and resulting winter concentrations, areas we currently manage will remain a priority.

Issue: The Wildlife Area Manager proposed a new strategy to be added to the plan, which would provide for revegetation trials in the sediment retention area included in the WSDOT land transfer. The group supported the idea.

Response: We will recommend that it be added to the plan. Initial efforts will require little or no new budgetary support but, when promising measures are identified, additional funding will be required for broader implementation.

Issue: The Wildlife Area Manager told the group about an issue that WDFW had been debating internally over the past two years regarding the elk hunts on the wildlife area. The issue was whether or not hunts should occur during the month of December. This is during the time when the wildlife area is closed to public access to prevent elk from harassment to help reduce their loss of body fat reserves that they need to survive the winter. The rationale behind hunting in December is that typically more animals are present and harvest could be increased to help meet herd reduction goals identified in the elk herd plan.

Members of the group expressed concerns and did not support hunting this late in the season. Items noted were the impact on other animals and the energy expenditures that could impact winter mortality. Because the animals can be so concentrated and vulnerable on the wildlife area at this time, a suggestion was made that it would be more appropriate to hunt the surrounding areas if it were to occur that late.

Response: We will make the game program staff aware of the group's concern on this point.

Issue: Private feeding of elk became an issue in the elk herd area during the past winter. One of the group members who helped to sponsor one such program near the wildlife area asked if WDFW would support or consider winter-feeding of elk in a broader area on a cooperative basis with citizen groups to prevent what was referred to as starvation. The merits of widespread feeding programs and the drawbacks were debated within the group.

Response: WDFW does not endorse private feeding of wildlife and limits its own feeding efforts to situations where it is required to maintain populations due to permanent habitat loss such as the case in a few select areas East of the Cascades and in extreme situations. Where natural winter range is available, the benefits of feeding are questionable because other factors such as the animal's condition entering the winter and weather severity are probably larger

contributors to winter mortality than food availability. If feeding efforts became a regular practice and were successful in reducing natural winter mortality, it could lead to increased populations beyond what the habitat can support, changed animal behavior, new or increased damage problems, and potentially disease spread.

Public concern is a factor that we consider when deciding whether to implement winter-feeding and was a key factor in the decision to feed on the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area the past two winters. The decision was based on animal concentrations and current and forecasted weather conditions. The wildlife area is unique in the herd area as well due to its location as an area that elk naturally migrate to in higher numbers than seen in other parts of the herd's range. Feeding at this site only was employed due to the concentration of animals and limited habitat due to changes in the landscape. Feeding here is seen as a short-term measure that may be necessary in some years until the herd is reduced in number and in better balance with its available habitat.

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/

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