



# MOUNT ST. HELENS WILDLIFE AREA 2010 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/](http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/) that provides management direction for the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area Complex including the 6,589-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, 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 2009 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies, and performance measures for 2010.

## Updates/Changes

In 2009 several events or changes occurred that will affect future management of the Wildlife Area. The most significant change is that the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area more than doubled in size. This was through completion of the land transfer from the Washington Department of Transportation (DOT) discussed in the management plan and previous updates. Because much of this land has been impacted by sediment deposited behind the sediment retention structure located downstream, management of the site will present unique challenges and opportunities. Although some activities have already been addressed in the plan and previous updates, we anticipate spending a good portion of our time in 2010 developing specific management strategies for this new portion of the wildlife area.

Almost concurrently with the land exchange, the US Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) came forward with a pilot project proposal intended to retain more sediment in the area in a manner which may also speed the recovery of fish and wildlife habitat within the sediment retention area on lands now owned by WDFW. The project entails placing structures on the “sediment plain” that are designed to collect river sediments and

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prevent them from moving further downstream. WDFW is cooperating with the Corps in hopes of getting the pilot project under way in 2010.

The winter of 2008-2009 was relatively mild in terms of weather conditions. Public concerns about elk wintering on the wildlife area are well known and, in combination with more severe conditions, in two prior winters had led to emergency winter feeding on the mudflow where elk concentrations are the highest. The annual winter mortality survey was conducted in early May. The survey was originally planned in April, but had to be cancelled due to an unusually late snow fall which made conducting the survey impossible. A total of 32 winter-kills were located in the survey area. Counts of elk in the survey area were done monthly during the winter and ranged from a low of 33 to a high of 334. WDFW made one minor change to the Elk Winter Monitoring Protocol (Appendix 7 of the Management Plan) which allows the flexibility for biologists from other entities to lead survey teams during the annual mortality count. This was done as an efficiency measure to reduce travel and other associated expenses while still maintaining the standards needed for a reliable survey.



Remains of a winter kill elk found during the annual winter mortality count.

In previous years success rates and satisfaction among hunters who participated in the hunt on the wildlife area (mudflow elk area 5099) had been low. In 2009 changes were implemented to increase harvest and improve the experience provided in the hunts. The boundaries of the hunt area were expanded to include areas to the north and south of the wildlife area and permits were offered to general modern firearm, archery, and muzzleloader hunters for the first time as well as youth and disabled hunters. Almost all of the hunters who drew permits were satisfied with the hunts and harvest numbers increased. Part of WDFW's Mt. St. Helens Elk Herd Management Plan calls for reducing the size of the herd and these changes were made in an effort to partially address that goal. The hunting strategy in 2010 will be similar to last year's.

### New Issues

Under Washington law, Forest Road Maintenance and Abandonment Plans (RMAP) are required for all major forest landowners, including WDFW, to address water quality and fish and wildlife habitat concerns. Forest roads on the newly acquired DOT lands have not previously been inventoried or assessed for problems; therefore, this legally required task must be accomplished as soon as possible. Inventory and survey work are already underway and we hope to complete the RMAP in the near future. The condition of some of the forest stands on the site is also an item of interest and the potential need for timber harvest was already recognized prior to acquiring the land. WDFW's forester will be working with the wildlife area manager and regional staff to develop recommendations to improve conditions in the forest stands.

In addition to the above activities, two other proposals involving the new addition are either under way or are being evaluated. These include the Corps' sediment management pilot project discussed above and a proposal to develop a trail by Cowlitz County originating at the Hoffstadt Bluffs Visitor Center and connecting to Ecopark Resort, a privately owned facility. Construction of the Corps' project is expected to get underway in 2010 and the advisory group and WDFW district biologists will be asked to evaluate and comment on the trail proposal as part of the planning process for the new lands.

Planning is underway for an intertidal fish habitat enhancement project on the Abernathy Creek satellite unit. The project is one of many listed projects in the Lower Columbia River Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the State of Washington and the U.S. government intended to enhance survival of out migrating juvenile salmonids. Other potential projects may occur on the Fisher Island and Two Forks satellite units and on the Shillapoo Wildlife Area. The feasibility studies and planning for these projects are expected to take up a substantial amount of staff time.

### Major Stewardship Accomplishments



View of the "sediment plain" portion of the lands which were transferred from WDOT to WDFW.

As mentioned above, the DOT land transfer was completed. The transaction included a total of 3,816 acres between the west boundary of the original wildlife area parcel and the Corps of Engineers Sediment Retention Structure. The property includes the bed of sediment, which has been deposited behind the dam, and a surrounding buffer that includes forested areas, some old pastures and orchards where home sites once existed, and numerous tributaries to the Toutle River. During the coming year, we plan to engage the Citizens Advisory Group and other

programs within WDFW in developing specific management strategies for the property beyond those basic measures that have already been developed.

The transfer of Eagle Island from Clark County to WDFW in the North Fork Lewis River was not completed but progress was made and the transfer should be completed soon. The design study for salmon enhancement projects was completed and the Cowlitz Tribe is applying for a grant to undertake the first project in cooperation with Clark County and WDFW.

WDFW engineering crews completed construction of wood structures along one-half mile of the mudflow edge intended to prevent future erosion and provide the opportunity to establish a forested riparian zone in the same area. Trees and shrubs were planted within the construction area as well as both up and downstream. Volunteers were instrumental in the planting of approximately 14,000 trees and shrubs including red and Sitka alder, ninebark, red-osier dogwood, cascara, black cottonwood, salmonberry, red cedar, Douglas fir, Sitka spruce, grand fir, and noble fir. Overall survival of the plants was very good with the exception of the coniferous species that were planted in drier areas. An additional planting will occur in 2010 to supplement the work done over the past two years. This will include modifying the planting and maintenance regimen for the conifers in hopes of improving survival.



A portion of the completed stream stabilization project

Volunteers and WDFW staff applied forage maintenance or enhancement treatments to at least 160 acres. This included initial rehabilitation of an area we have called “west boulder flat.” This site was harrowed using ATVs, limed, seeded, and fertilized over the spring, summer, and fall. WDFW also hand sprayed Scotch broom plants over an area of about 250 acres. Most of this work began at the easternmost wildlife area boundary and extended west approximately 1.3 miles.

Long time Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area volunteer Mike Braaten was honored by WDFW with the award of Volunteer of the Year for his work helping us with many projects on the wildlife area. Braaten, whose volunteer hours probably number in the thousands, was also featured in an article in the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation’s volunteer newsletter.



Volunteer Mike Braaten

**Status Report of 2009 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 2010.

| <b>2009 Performance Measure</b>   | <b>Status of Performance Measure</b>  | <b>Explanation of Progress/ 2010 Related Activity/ Comments</b>   |
|---|---|---|
| <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, over-seeding, and fertilizing. Identify other sites with potential for intensive ground based management. Continue to evaluate the benefits of these measures as well as forage production in other areas.</p> | <p>Grant funding allowed us to surpass the 50 acre goal. Lime and/or fertilizer were applied to approximately 160 acres to maintain existing winter range forage areas.</p> <p>Clip plots were collected from several sites and have been dried. Time constraints have not yet allowed us to weigh the samples and tabulate the data.</p> | <p>Continue work in existing areas and expand to old pastures in the recently acquired lands as appropriate and funding allows.</p> <p>Complete analysis of 2009 samples and collect additional samples in 2010 as time permits in the fall.</p>                |
| <p>Cooperate with volunteers to complete grant funded forage enhancement projects. Identify opportunities for future projects and apply for additional funds as opportunities arise.</p>  | <p>The initial phases of these projects have been completed.</p>  | <p>Ongoing maintenance will be required to assure that long-term benefits are realized.</p>   |
| <p>Complete the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) funded project to implement the placement of engineered streambank protection measures to further stabilize the remaining mudflow and Toutle River floodplain. Work with other partners to expand on this work through other currently funded grants and future grant applications.</p>   | <p>Construction work was completed on the WWRP project.</p> <p>The Cowlitz Tribe also received funding and upgraded the initial project structures downstream that had been damaged.</p>  | <p>An additional project has been funded through the state capital budget to continue this work and construction is expected to begin in 2010.</p> <p>The Cowlitz Tribe also has funding for an additional similar project further downstream.</p>              |
| <p>Control a minimum of 40 acres of Scotch broom and other noxious weeds.</p>   | <p>Control work covered about 250 acres with the help of WDFW’s weed crew.</p>  | <p>Coordinate with weed crew and continue in 2010.</p>  |
| <p>Implement measures as needed and as funding allows including 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>Approximately 14,000 trees and shrubs were planted over a three mile strip. The same area was seeded with an erosion control seed mix.</p>   | <p>Approximately 5,000 more plants will be added in 2010 as part of the WWRP grant project.</p> <p>Work completed to date may reduce the future needs for planting along this area but may also provide additional opportunity to expand habitat plantings.</p> |

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| Assuming completion of the DOT land transfer, begin formal resource inventory, management strategy development, and initial management within funding limitations on the transferred lands.  | The land transfer was completed in November. Resource inventories began in 2010.   | Continue inventory as necessary and coordinate with internal staff and external stakeholders to develop management strategies.                                       |
| Continue to work with the district wildlife biologist to provide effective and enjoyable hunting opportunities within the wildlife area and make adjustments as necessary.   | Hunting success and satisfaction improved with the changes made in 2009.   | The modified seasons will continue in 2010.  |
| 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.                           | This work was not completed in part due to the number of ongoing grant projects that were under way in 2009 and the beginning of focusing attention on inventory and planning work for the newly acquired lands. | In light of the DOT lands recently being acquired, much of the existing information will need to be modified. We will strive to make this a higher priority in 2010. |
| 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. | We began to collect information for a site plan to submit to Weyerhaeuser for the 3100 Road site but a plan was not completed. This was affected by the same projects noted in the item above.                   | Continue in 2010.<br><br>Combine with item above and expand to include the newly acquired lands if possible.   |
| Remove one old dugout and perform other clean up at the old ball field on the Hall Road Unit to address attractive nuisance, liability, and unsightly appearance of the site.  | Both dugouts were removed through a community service project by a local high school senior. Some of the cleanup still needs to be completed.  | Finish cleanup. Explore further work on the site.  |

### **New Strategies**

No new strategies are proposed as part of this management plan update. However, we expect as the lands included in the 2009 acquisition are evaluated and discussions continue in the coming year, that a number of new activities will be included in the next update.

### **2010 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 a minimum of 50 acres of intensive treatments within identified “Intensive Forage Management Areas” (IMA’s) to enhance elk forage, including those that were rehabilitated in the past two years, utilizing some or all of the following techniques: mowing, harrowing,

liming, over-seeding, and fertilizing. Expand this effort to include old pasture sites on the recently acquired lands as appropriate. Identify other sites with potential for intensive ground based management and seek funding for enhancements where needed. Continue to evaluate the benefits of these measures as well as forage production in other areas.

- 2) Work with the Citizens Advisory Group and WDFW staff to continue resource inventory, management strategy development, and initial management within funding limitations on the lands recently transferred to WDFW from the Washington Department of Transportation. Identify opportunities for future projects and apply for additional funds for these activities as opportunities arise.
- 3) Continue to work with WDFW engineers, the Cowlitz Tribe, and others to complete currently funded projects to stabilize the North Fork Toutle River and to help prevent further losses of winter range habitat. Assess the need for further work and seek funding as needed and the opportunity arises.
- 4) To assure that fish and wildlife concerns are taken into consideration, participate in project development and monitoring of the Corps sediment management pilot project and their planning for long-term sediment management in the Toutle and Cowlitz Rivers.
- 5) Explore opportunities, through acquisition or other means, to provide secure year round access to the wildlife area from SR 504. Seek grants and develop partnerships as the opportunity arises.
- 6) Control a minimum of 40 acres of Scotch broom and other noxious weeds.
- 7) Implement measures as needed and funding allows, including 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 of anadromous fish habitat in the Toutle River.
- 8) As time and other factors permit, begin re-vegetation trials within the sediment retention area as referenced in the 2008 plan update.
- 9) In light of the completion of the DOT land transfer, update information on the WDFW website, produce new maps and written information; including rules, for wildlife area users. Post materials at the most frequently used access points. Seek cooperation from other landowners where possible to provide the best locations.
- 10) As time and other factors allow, explore options and the need for any permits required to remove the remaining ball field features on the Hall Road Unit. Remove these features assuming any approvals are obtained and any required funding is available.

### **Citizens Advisory Group Input**

In Lieu of holding a meeting to review the management plan update, the document was sent to all advisory group members. Comments received and responses to those comments are outlined below. Forgoing this regular meeting was intended to allow us to facilitate another meeting where we could begin to gather input on issues, ideas, and concerns related more specifically to planning for future management of the lands which were recently added to the wildlife area. CAG members represent the following organizations:

Mt. St. Helens Preservation Society  
Cascade Paragliders  
Back Country Horsemen

Cowlitz Game and Anglers/RMEF  
Weyerhaeuser  
US Forest Service  
Local advocate for fish restoration  
Local schools and community  
Local community advocate  
Willapa Hills Audubon  
Toutle Valley Community Association  
Cowlitz County Weed Management

The following comments were received:

**Issue:** The comments received regarding the potential of developing trails were generally positive. In one instance there was interest in trying to form a loop trail.

**Response:** The source of funding that Cowlitz County has available for trails has a sideboard that it cannot be used for trails that form a loop. However, assuming that we do move forward with a trail project, this source of funding could potentially be used as match for a grant application to fund other trail segments. The overall topic of trails is something that we intend to continue to explore with the advisory group in the coming year as we develop management direction for the new unit.

**Issue:** Comments were received regarding the past and ongoing efforts to protect and enhance elk winter range habitat on the original mudflow unit of the wildlife area. Suggestions were made that efforts above the valley floor would be less susceptible to loss due to erosion or other factors.

**Response:** These comments were similar to ones received during last year's update process where acquisition of "higher ground" was a topic of discussion. Until the recent addition of the DOT lands, we did not have such areas in which to work. Improved engineered stabilization structures were also not in place until this year, which will help reduce losses of existing habitat while other areas can be enhanced. Shifting habitat work downstream however, will not necessarily change the movement patterns of the animals and we continue to see work on the mudflow as necessary. Resources currently available will have to be balanced between the sites as one of the concepts we have tried to pursue for years is to not only increase the quality of habitat but also the distribution of winter forage across a broader area. Over time, this may allow the animals to disperse across a broader area as well, which would be a better situation. We also, due in part to the urging of the Citizens Advisory Group, have begun to explore funding options to acquire additional lands to further expand the options to manage habitat, not only for elk, but a much broader suite of species as well.

**Issue:** There was a request for information on elk harvest and whether progress was being made toward WDFW's goal of reducing the elk herd numbers to 10,000.

**Response:** With regard to the mudflow elk area permit hunts, which includes the eastern portion of the wildlife area, harvest data indicate that 63 hunters took a total of 26 elk in 2009. In

contrast, under the old hunt area and permit distribution 20 permit holders took only 6 elk in 2008. A new study is in progress that was initiated in 2009 of the larger St. Helens elk herd to gain a better population estimate and understanding of the herd. We anticipate at least one more year of data collection before we can make a reliable population estimate which will then allow us to evaluate our progress towards reaching our herd reduction goal.

**Issue:** One of the group members who had received and commented on the Corps of Engineers pilot project proposal was concerned with the location that they had chosen for the project. They raised a concern that the project should be located closer to the sediment retention structure. The idea was that in that location greater benefits could be derived in terms of reducing the inputs of fine sediments to the river during lower flow periods.

**Response:** The Corps had been consulting with WDFW for some months and one of the questions that had been raised was why the specific location was chosen. A number of reasons were cited including ease of access and the opportunity to try a variety of techniques and structure types. We certainly agree that the movement of finer materials into the river further downstream is a concern. The Corps is also working on a long term sediment management plan for the larger watershed and, when given the opportunity, we will continue to recommend that this issue receives consideration for future projects.

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