



# OAK CREEK WILDLIFE AREA 2007 MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife



**Elk at Headquarters Feedsite on Highway 12**

## **Land Management Summary**

This is an update to the 2006 Oak Creek Wildlife Area Management Plan ([http://wdfw.wa.gov/land/wildlife\\_areas/management\\_plans/pdfs/draft\\_oak\\_creek\\_plan.pdf](http://wdfw.wa.gov/land/wildlife_areas/management_plans/pdfs/draft_oak_creek_plan.pdf)) that provides management direction for the Oak Creek State Wildlife Area Complex including the 42,200 acre Oak Creek Wildlife Area unit, the 4,960 acre Cowiche Wildlife Area unit, the recently acquired 10,200 acre Tieton Wildlife Area unit (*see below*), and

various smaller “satellite” units, all located in Yakima County, Washington. 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 2006 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies and performance measures for 2007.

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### Updates/Changes

Major changes that occurred in 2006 affecting the wildlife area were the approvals of the Tieton and Oak Flats land acquisitions. These purchases and transfers to WDFW will be finalized in 2007.

The Tieton purchase was made possible by the direct involvement of the SE Washington office of The Nature Conservancy (TNC). They acquired the rights to former Plum Creek Timber Company lands within the entire township and then assisted WDFW in successful Federal and State grant requests to secure purchase. TNC compiled an impressive list of partners to collaborate on restoration of sound forest ecology through use of prescribed burning across the Tieton Forest landscape. A pilot burn project is scheduled for 2007.

The wildlife area manager authored and co-wrote two successful grant applications for the Oak Flats Riparian Protection project that will allow WDFW to purchase a major in-holding and then restore 300 acres of riparian habitat along the Naches River. Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program grant funds in the amount of \$650,000 and Bonneville Power Administration grant funds in the amount of \$550,000 are anticipated in 2007. These funds will protect and provide potential habitat for migratory bull trout, an ESA listed species.

### New Issues

In 2006, Boise Cascade sold their entire Pacific Northwest land holdings and other assets, including Perpetual Timber Rights (PTRs) they owned on the wildlife area (*see management plan for explanation*) to Western Pacific Timber LLC (WPT), a large land development corporation. WDFW entered into negotiations with WPT that may result in an exchange during 2007 that will return the PTRs to WDFW after 55+ years of ownership by Boise Cascade. This will result in very positive management implications for future improvement of forest habitat on the wildlife area that relate to wildlife values, rather than timber production.

Wildlife area staff is working in close coordination with the Yakima County Noxious Weed Board to address the recent rapid spread of Dalmatian Toadflax, particularly along the Naches River and the Highway 410 corridor. Introducing biological control on the wildlife area may be the only option due to the rugged landscape and aggressive nature of the weed. *Weed control and use of biological agents was an important issue identified by the CAG.*

Coordination with DNR to update Road Maintenance and Abandonment Plans (RMAP) specific to the wildlife area was initiated in 2006. Past RMAPs submitted by Boise Cascade (PTR lands) and Plum Creek (Tieton township) need to be reviewed and updated to address current maintenance standards. Inventory and assessment surveys for the wildlife area are planned for 2007.

### Major Stewardship Accomplishments

Coordination on the Oak Flats and Tieton Forest projects was successful in 2006 and will be continued in 2007. The access road into Oak Flats on the south side of the Naches River was

rebuilt and cleared of rockfall and will be used in 2007 to facilitate acquisition and restoration activities on this project.

180 acres of PTR land logged in 2005 by WPT was reseeded to a habitat forage mix in the North Fork Oak Creek drainage. An RMEF grant submitted by the wildlife area manager for an additional \$10,200 for forage reseeding was approved and will be initiated in 2007.

A low water pump system was constructed and installed at the headquarters to be used during late summer when use of WDFW diversionary water rights combined with low flows in Oak Creek may impact resident fish populations. At these times, water will be pulled directly from the adjacent Tieton River with the new pump.



**Oak Flats bisected by the Naches River**

Negotiations to establish a wireless internet system for the wildlife area continued in 2006. WDFW will partner with Yakima County and Washington Department of Transportation, rather than a local provider, to provide high-speed broadband internet for business use and to support wildlife cameras along Highway 12 within the Oak Creek unit.

**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.

<b>2006 Performance Measure</b>	<b>Status of Performance Measure</b>	<b>Explanation of Progress/ 2007 Related Activity/ Comments</b>
Maintain seven elk and bighorn sheep feed sites to control wintering populations.	Fed approx. 4000+ animals per day through the winter.	Early winter moderated and reduced hay need during later months. Surplus carryover.
Maintain winter range vehicle and early spring area closures.	Closures reduce disturbance to wintering wildlife when animal energy levels are low.	Need to address expansion of Cowiche-West Valley closures with DT / CAG in 2007.
Perform mandatory weed control on wildlife area and coordinate with YCNWB.	Staff controlled Scotch thistle and knapweed on 5000+ acres.	Use of GPS units to document infestations is assisting in control.
Reseed 150 acres of logged forest to forage mix.	Reseeded 180 acres to a big game forage enhancement mix	Plan to implement a much larger project with a new RMEF grant in 2007.
Reconstruct road access into	Cleared and rebuilt 800 feet of	Plan minor maintenance in

Oak Flats and Cougar Canyon.	road in rockslide area.	2007.
Construct 3 educational signs at access points on the Cleman Mtn. bighorn sheep range.	Message has not been finalized or reviewed by DT or CAG yet. Signs not installed.	Education is important to lessen disturbance to bighorn sheep. Project is planned for 2007.
Maintain golden eagle nest closures as needed.	Eagle activity was monitored and a closure installed around active nests.	Location of nest necessitated the closure of an adjacent popular rock-climbing area.
Install wireless internet and wildlife camera at headquarters site.	Negotiations with a local ISP became extended and unproductive during 2006. New partners and a new concept were selected in late 2006, but no construction yet.	Plan to continue development of system and agreements with partners during 2007. Funding expired and a new grant will have to be submitted in 2007.
Complete construction of low water pump station at HQ	Pump station was completed and is operational.	Need to complete Point of Diversion documents with Wash Dept. of Ecology.
Submit WWRP Riparian grant for Oak Flats acquisition.	Grant was submitted and has been approved for funding.	The acquisition and some infrastructure removal are planned for 2007.
Provide guidance and liaison with WEC volunteer group to staff visitor center.	WEC continued to staff visitor center and provide education to thousands of public in 2006.	Plan to assist WEC re-submit in 2007 for another two-year ALEA grant
Facilitate acquisition of 15-acre parcel of private land adjacent to the bighorn sheep wintering area.	Acquisition was accomplished in 2006.	Negotiations continue with an adjacent landowner for another 15-acre parcel.

### **New Strategies**

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

If the Citizens Advisory Group provided public comments on new issues, they will be identified (*in italics*) 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.

### **Agency Objective 2: Protect, restore and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats.**

#### **1. Protect priority habitats and state listed species.**

WDFW began development of a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for wildlife areas in 2006 that will inventory listed species and map their habitats, including species no longer present but with suitable habitat to support them still remaining on the wildlife area. As part of this effort, current management activities that occur on a wildlife area will also be inventoried, to determine if such

activities are beneficial or detrimental to at-risk wildlife species. Depending on the outcome of the HCP, strategies will then be developed to address identified issues or concerns. Initial HCP development for the Oak Creek WA will begin in late 2007 or early 2008.

## **2. Protect priority habitats and state listed species.**

A critical section of mule deer winter range (T15-R15-Section 1) in the Sanford Pasture area has been placed on the market by the current owner. This parcel is low elevation, south-facing aspect of shrub-steppe mixed with P. pine / Douglas fir corridors that provides excellent browse and cover for wintering deer and elk. It is also an important in-holding to the WA, with State land on three sides and USFS ownership to the north. The threat of premier rural development or establishment of an exclusive private hunting preserve is immediate, and an interested party has already been identified.

A. Strategy: Coordinate with the current owner to purchase a restrictive conservation easement or fee title acquisition of this property to protect the habitat from development. Establish partners, donors, cooperators, and funding sources to accomplish this as soon as possible.

**Agency Objective 3: Ensure WDFW activities, programs, facilities and lands are consistent with local, state and federal regulations that protect and recover fish, wildlife and their habitats.**

### **1. Protect federal and state listed species.**

Establish an HCP that inventories existing activities for the wildlife area (*see Objective 2, #1 under New Strategies above*).

### **2007 Performance Measures**

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

- 1) Complete CAG selection to reform a group specific to the Oak Creek WA.
- 2) Inventory road system within existing RMAP's for the Tieton township and the PTR lands to determine priority of maintenance needs relating to fish passage issues.
- 3) Coordinate cooperative road management system with USFS and The Nature Conservancy for the Tieton township.
- 4) Facilitate prescribed burn project in the Oak Creek drainage with collaborative partners.
- 5) Reseed 200 acres of logged forested habitat to elk forage. (RMEF project).
- 6) Draft operational plans for Tieton and Oak Flats projects. Utilize ID teams / partners to develop plans.
- 7) Facilitate acquisition of the Oak Flats, Seymour, and other properties in the Cowiche area. Develop strategy to protect Section 1 (*see Objective 2, #2 under New Strategies above*). Begin infrastructure removal on the Seymour in-holding after purchase.
- 8) Negotiate solution with landowner to provide public vehicle access to Mud Lake prior to September 2007.
- 9) Construct cooperative wireless internet system with DOT and Yakima County to provide business needs and wildlife camera capabilities for the WDFW website.

- 10) Monitor temporary grazing permit on the USFS Tieton grazing allotment to monitor impacts to intersecting WDFW ownerships. Determine if a Grazing Plan will be required for 2008.
- 11) Install an informational kiosk each at the headquarters and bighorn sheep viewing sites.
- 12) Liaison with the Oak Creek Wildlife Education Corp (WEC) to submit a new 2-year ALEA grant to support volunteer operations.

### **Citizens Advisory Group Input**

The last meeting of the combined Citizens Advisory Group for the LT Murray/Wenas, Colockum, and Oak Creek Wildlife Areas was held on November 21, 2006. The decision to restructure individual CAG's for each wildlife area was made in early 2007, and has been accomplished. Meetings with the new CAG's will be held mid-2007 by each individual manager to review management progress and address any new issues or receive input on existing issues.

The following new input/issues were addressed at the November 2006 meeting:

**Issue:** Use of stream adjacent roads by public / motorized vehicles potentially adds sediment to fish-bearing streams. WDFW is legally required to address this issue on WDFW owned lands.

**Response:** *Would fire suppression and/or tribal hunting be allowed on closed roads? Roads can be opened up in emergency situations—most fire suppression is by air transport in remote locations. Tribal hunters have no special privileges regarding use of closed roads on WDFW lands. Could single-track trails be established on closed roads for recreational motorized and horse / mountain bike use? More road closures to motorized use will result in increased illegal use out of frustration. WDFW's position is that motorized use delivers the majority of sediment on stream-adjacent roads, but will attempt to relocate or open up ridge roads to provide motorized access. Access may be needed on closed roads for effective weed control. WDFW will attempt to leave administrative access, or use boats / ATV's for weed control. Can WDFW remove non-Green Dot jeep roads from their maps to lessen confusion, put stronger emphasis on enforcement of regulations on wildlife areas, and increase fines for illegal off-road use? WDFW agrees with these comments and will try to address them.*

**Issue:** Increasing damage by elk to private lands in the Parke Creek and Caribou areas is occurring and is currently controlled by WDFW issuing kill permits to landowners to remove the elk doing damage. However, this is counter-productive as Colockum Herd numbers are below WDFW management objectives. Also, some data shows road density and increased public use of winter range will displace animals to surrounding private ranges, where there is less disturbance. Early spring shed antler hunting has also greatly increased in popularity. WDFW management options include 1) seasonal closures, 2) vehicle closures, and 3) "no entry" closures.

**Response:** *Sportsman club spokesperson feels WDFW does not have adequate data to support additional closures—should focus on increasing enforcement efforts first and also collect more data before restricting access. WDFW could enhance forage on its lands or increase livestock grazing to attract and hold more elk. Closures affect persons of disability especially, but may be necessary to protect wintering wildlife. Many comments addressed the variables of the situation. WDFW will gather more data before deciding on a trial plan of action.*

At the conclusion of the meeting, managers advised that plans would be finalized before the next CAG meeting.

**Want to see the full plan?**

Go to -

[http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife\\_areas/management\\_plans/index.htm](http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/index.htm)

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