SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA
2007 MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Land Management Summary

This is an update to the 2006 Skagit Wildlife Area Management Plan the full plan document can be found at this link. *http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/index.htm*. The plan provides management direction for the Skagit Snoqualmie Wildlife Area Complex that includes the numerous satellite units of Skagit Wildlife Area and a large portion of the Skagit Bay Estuary, which totals 16,708 acres in Skagit, Island, and San Juan counties and the five Snoqualmie units, approximately 1957 acres in King and Snohomish 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 2006 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies and performance measures for 2007.

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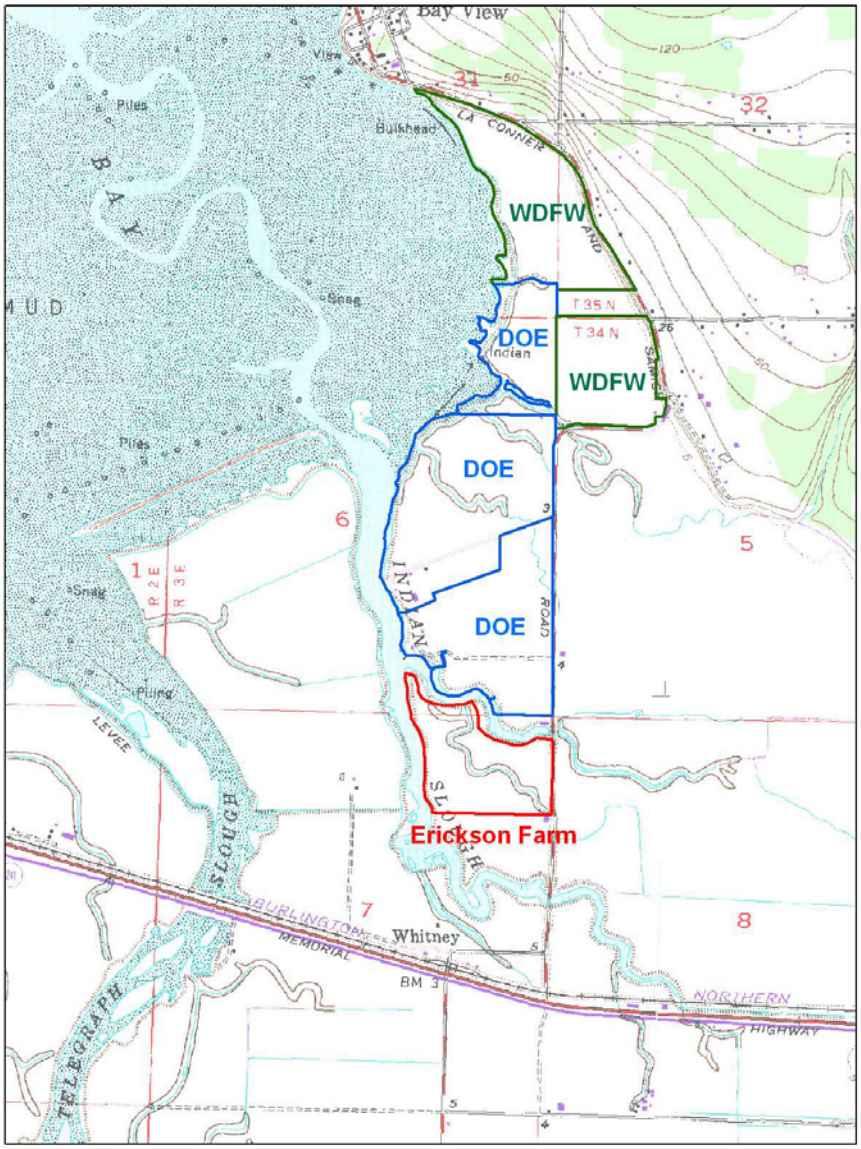
Updates/Changes

In 2006, several changes occurred on the wildlife area. Coastal Wetland Grant funds were awarded to acquire several parcels along South Padilla Bay near the community of Bayview. Wetland restoration and enhancement projects in South Padilla Bay were identified in the Pacific Coast Joint Venture plan and protect the area from further development. These properties are located near the Padilla Bay National Marine Sanctuary, Department of Ecology Demonstration Farm, and Skagit County Padilla Bay Trail.



The proximity of these new properties to other state and local ownerships provide an excellent opportunity to develop local partnerships and cooperative projects. Management options include a variety of projects to improve fish and wildlife habitat within a working agricultural system and a growing residential community as well as providing increased opportunities for fish and wildlife oriented outdoor education and recreation. Community outreach efforts following acquisition have begun and will continue through project design and development phases.

November floods were not as destructive as early predictions indicated but there were some slight infrastructure damages on the Skagit Wildlife Area. The shear log that protects the boathouse and moorage facility on Freshwater Slough was damaged and a small portion of the dike on the Island Unit eroded during high water conditions. Representatives from FEMA recently toured these sites to examine the damage and make a determination. Level of funding available for repairs is unknown at this time.

In 2006, a National Coastal Wetland Grant was awarded to WDFW and Skagit River Systems Cooperative in the amount of $568,872 to complete the funding package needed to implement the Wiley Slough restoration project on the Skagit WLA Headquarters Unit. The Wylie Slough restoration has been identified as a priority restoration project in the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan and House Bill1418 Report: Tidegates and Intertidal Salmon Habitat in the Skagit Basin. The remainder of the funding comes from federal and state sources: National Resource Conservation Service - $1,290,000 and Washington State Salmon Recovery Funding Board - $1,175,155. Final permitting and initial construction work is scheduled to begin in late 2007.

New Issues

Snow goose collaborative process – A committee of concerned citizens has been organized to examine the complex issues related to the increasing snow goose population. The issues being discussed range from increased depredation to agricultural crops, improving hunter access, improving wildlife viewing opportunities, unethical/unsafe hunting and viewing behavior, etc. The Snow goose committee will provide a summary of their activities to the June '07 WDFW Commission meeting. A final report from the Snow goose committee will be compiled to provide recommendations to the Commission that address community concerns. These recommendations could influence the directions of future management strategies on wildlife area units within the snow goose zone (Fir Island Farms/Hayton Snow Goose Reserve, Leque Island, Skagit Headquarters, and the Island Unit).

Habitat Conservation Planning for Wildlife Area Lands - WDFW is developing a habitat conservation plan (HCP) for land management activities (recreation, operation and maintenance, enhancement and restoration) occurring on state-owned and managed Wildlife Areas. An HCP is a management strategy that provides long-term certainty of ESA compliance while providing for conservation of species. HCPs are developed under Section 10 of ESA, which provides a means for non-federal entities to ensure that their actions will not conflict with the conservation needs of ESA-listed and other at-risk wildlife species. This HCP will guide long-term conservation and protection of species, and will ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Wildlife Areas HCP will identify any potential conservation opportunities as well as potential adverse impacts to ESA-listed species or their habitats resulting from activities covered in the plan. The HCP will also specify management strategies to avoid, minimize, and mitigate for those impacts. Once completed the HCP must be approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service (collectively referred to as "the Services"), the agencies responsible for implementing ESA.

This planning process will take several years to complete. During 2006, WDFW interviewed stakeholders and tribal staff to identify appropriate ways to involve the public and other interested parties in development of the Wildlife Areas HCP. Initial public meetings began in 2007 to introduce the public to the HCP planning process and to request input and involvement. To learn more about the goals and benefits of the Wildlife Areas HCP process check the fact sheet online at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hcp/wla_public.html

Dry Slough Estuary Function Restoration – A proposal has been submitted by the Skagit Conservation District in partnership with WDFW to the Puget Sound Nearshore Partnership for an Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program (ESRP) grant for design development and acquisition of a portion of Dry Slough (**Fir Island Farm/ Hayton Snow Goose Reserve**). The basic project objective is to restore and protect11.4 acres of estuary rearing habitat for ESA-listed salmon as well as improve the habitat condition of approximately 12 acres of blind channel habitat between the dike and Skagit Bay. This project has been identified in the Skagit Wildlife Area plan as a part of the House Bill 1418 Report on Tide gates and Salmon Habitat restoration priorities. The ESRP proposals are currently under review and grants will be awarded in August of 2007. For more information about this proposal and other ESRP grants visit http://www.pugetsoundnearshore.org/.

Johnson DeBay Slough Swan Reserve – A proposal has been submitted to the Puget Sound Energy Foundation to request funds to improve recreational access to this site by developing a viewing tower and improving ADA access viewing platform. Trumpeter Swan Society developed the grant proposal to request design and implementation money for this project.

Major Stewardship Accomplishments

Agricultural Enhancements – On the Skagit Wildlife Area in 2006 approximately 1480 acres of agriculture enhancements were provided through contract farming agreements and staff time. Standing crops were provided on the primary hunting units on the Skagit WA: Headquarters, Island, Leque Island and Samish Units. A 50/50 mix of corn and barley provided a diversity of winter forage habitat for waterfowl and provided enhanced hunting opportunities for the sportsman of Washington State. In addition, winter wheat and rye grass provided winter forage for the snow geese on the Fir Island/ Hayton Snow goose reserve while potatoes and corn were provided on the Johnson/DeBay Slough Swan Reserve.

Milltown Island - Skagit River System Cooperative proposed and implemented a large-scale habitat restoration project on Milltown Island (affecting ~310 acres) during Aug-Sept, 2006. The purpose of this restoration project was to restore natural hydrologic and biologic function to the isolated portions of Milltown Island by removing portions of the surrounding dike, creating and reconnecting channels and controlling reed canary grass by establishing riparian vegetation.

Due to time and logistical constraints, only about 75% of the project was completed in the summer of 2006. This currently amounts to 800ft of levee removed and 1,460ft of new interior channels. The remainder of the project will be completed in the summer of 2007, and will include the removal of additional exterior dike sections, the development of additional interior channel as well as

additional vegetation control and planting efforts. Funding for this project was provided by Seattle City Light and the Salmon Recovery Funding Board.

Deepwater Slough vegetation monitoring and restoration – Efforts continue on Deepwater Slough restoration project to enhance and restore native vegetation communities. Established invasive species such reed canary grass and cattail communities expanded following project implementation. Skagit River Systems Cooperative and Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group have acquired funding to examine the effect of mowing established cattail stands in the newly restored tidal environment. The first year of mowing (Aug 2003), resulted in short plants with no seed production. Following the second mowing cycle (June 2005) little regrowth occurred with many dead stems. Some native water plantain was observed on the site in the summer of 2006. Colonization of native sedges on bare earth were observed to take 2 years to occur following the dike removal at Deepwater Slough. Observation will continue during 2007 to determine the effectiveness of native vegetation in colonizing this site following this disturbance regime.

<u>Status Report of 2006 Performance Measures</u>

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.

Ongoing Performance Measures:

- Coordinate with the Shared Strategy effort to restore 2,682 acres of wetlands in the Skagit River delta (**Skagit Bay Estuary**). Continue with Wylie Slough planning and implementation
- Secure wetland habitat in the English Boom, Port Susan, Livingston, Skagit and South Padilla Bay areas for protection, restoration and enhancement purposes as identified by the Pacific Coast Joint Venture Plan **(Skagit Bay Estuary**)
- Work with WDFW Weed Crew to monitor and control approximately 150 acres of known problem weeds such as knotweed, purple loosestrife, spartina, thistle spp., poison

hemlock, and scotch broom on the **Headquarters, Island, Leque Island** and **Samish** units

- Identify noxious and invasive weeds and inventory species and distribution on all units
- Determine the risk or threat level of 18 weed species to develop control priorities
- Apply for grants to control weeds, plant native vegetation, and use the WDFW Weed Crew
- Develop programs and funding strategies (with WDFW staff, Citizen Advisory Group and others) to successfully buy/lease land for recreational purposes
- Work with the local agricultural community concerning what is planted, retaining or planting hedgerows for huntable and watchable wildlife; and how farming practices might benefit both farmers and fish and wildlife
- Continue regular CAG meetings in order to continue to provide public input on Wildlife Area Management
- Continue hosting public workshops to inform and educate citizens and recruit volunteers for various levels of assistance

2006 Performance Measure	**Status of Performance Measure**	**Explanation of Progress/ 2007 Related Activity/ Comments**
Finalize, with Skagit River Systems Cooperative, the restoration design for Milltown Island and implement project (**Skagit Bay Estuary**)	Project implementation 2/3 complete.	Will be completed summer 2007.
Support Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group in riparian vegetation on up to 200 acres along Deepwater Slough (**Island Unit**)	Some initial vegetation control completed. Planting plan to be developed and implemented in the winter of 2008.	Monitor, with tribal agencies, the Deepwater Slough Restoration project on **Island Unit**
Plant up to 610 acres of Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve in cereal grains	Completed – Approximately 73 acres on the WDFW portion of the Reserve were planted late. 17 additional acres were available in the private land.	Will continue these plantings in 2007.
Plant approximately 100 acres at Headquarters Unit 165 acres of Island Unit 145 acres of Johnson/DeBay Swan Reserve 215 acres of Leque Island Unit 280 acres of Samish Unit	Completed (acres planted) HQ- Corn (32) Barley (55) Island- Corn (40) Barley (95) DeBay– Corn () Leque- Corn (88) Barley(125) Samish- Corn(80) Barley(145)	Will continue as budget allows

Flood up to 60 acres (Headquarters Unit) and 70 acres (Island Unit)	Completed	
Identify at least four areas where shorebird habitat exists and could be easily be enhanced (**Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve, Island, Leque Island** and **Samish** units)	Water control and flood capabilities are currently limited on the wildlife area.	
Release 3,800 pheasants on **Headquarters** and **Leque Island** units and 100 each **Samish, Headquarters**, and **Leque Island** units for youth-only pheasant hunting season	Done with the assistance of volunteers Additional pheasants from Snoqualmie were transferred to the Skagit during the fall Snoqualmie floods.	Continue to release pheasant in 2007.
Attend and participate in monthly to quarterly Skagit Watershed Council, and Stillaguamish Implementation Review Committee meetings.	Meeting attendance has been limited due to other scheduling conflicts and deadlines.	Will continue to participate as time allows.
Maintain 50 footbridges on **Headquarters, Samish, Leque Island** and **Island Units**	Volunteer work party with WWA put in new footbridges and replaced/improved some existing ones on the Island Unit.	Need to identify other foot bridgework from other remaining units.
Post regulatory signs on **Goat Island** and **Guemes Island** units	Needs further review by the District team and citizen advisory group	Will continue to evaluate in 2007.
Work closely with the CAG, District Team and other stakeholders to prioritize and resolve issues over the next few years (access, sanitation and general information needs and priorities; additional recreational land/opportunities; overcrowding/conflicting recreational uses; dog-related impacts; and Watchable Wildlife site needs	Previously, scheduled a CAG meeting with limited response. A meeting has been for June 7	Additional CAG meetings will be scheduled for later in the summer to discuss issues.

Establish and maintain stewardship groups for **Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve, Goat Island, Leque Island** and other major units where justified	Scheduling new groups/committees are difficult with the other activities.	
Train and update existing stewardship groups for Johnson/DeBay Swan Reserve, Samish Unit, Camano Island Natural Area, Guemes Island and Island Unit.	Meeting planned for this spring for DeBay Slough Swan Reserve. Implementation of restoration planting and invasive species control on Camano Island Natural Area.	Continue to train and update in 2007.
Complete proposal for a flora and fauna inventory (baseline) of the Headquarters Unit prior to the implementation of the Wylie Slough Restoration Project	No funding available at this time. With the HCP process there is the potential to conduct a partial project inventory.	Efforts to gather existing project reports and data will initiate.

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.

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

1. **Protect state listed species.**

2. **Manage Species Diversity**

   Concerns exist regarding the impact of recreational activity on wildlife habitat and populations. To address these concerns the district team will evaluate public use and wildlife population to determine if public use restrictions are necessary and if so to develop a proposal to establish a Wildlife Reserve on **Cottonwood Island Unit**.

Agency Objective: 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 federally listed species.**

   WDFW is currently working through a Habitat Conservation Planning process with US Fish and Wildlife Service to identify all activities on our wildlife areas and how these activities have the potential to impact endangered species. This review will identify potential impacts and develop way to minimize and mitigate these impacts.

   A. Strategy: Work with WDFW HCP planning staff to implement HCP process.

<u>2007 Performance Measures</u>

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

Performance Measures into 2007:

- Implement, with Skagit River Systems Cooperative, restoration of 175 acres on Wylie Slough to intertidal estuary (Headquarters Unit)
- Engage the Wylie Slough community concerned about the loss of upland habitat and recreational opportunities to develop access alternatives and recommendations.
- Develop a prioritized list of units in which to conduct an inventory of species, use and needs
- Determine, with Ducks Unlimited and drainage districts, the feasibility of improving water level management capabilities on **Samish** and **Leque Island** unit wetlands
- Develop a conceptual plan, with Ducks Unlimited, on the **Island Unit** to improve wetland management capabilities for waterfowl
- Evaluate using vegetation on **Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve** as a visual barrier to reduce traffic congestion
- Evaluate options to reduce the 'shooting line' around **Fir Island Farms/ Hayton Reserve -**DONE
- Sign access areas with updated "Use Regulations" concerning legal firearms and times of use
- Investigate transfer of **Sinclair Island** to State Parks Department (this unit is boat access only)
- Educate hunters and enforce the 15-shell limit, with enforcement officers, on the **Samish** and **Island units** to provide quality and increased hunting opportunities
- Coordinate public use of Fir Island dike trails (**Skagit Bay Estuary**) with Dike District #22 for waterfowl hunting access - DONE
- Implement programs that reduce illegal dumping and vandalism on all access sites
- Evaluate liability of unauthorized public use of historic infrastructure (concrete military structures) on **Goat Island Unit**
- Secure long-term lease to use private moorage facility near **Headquarters Unit**, or move moorage to public land
- Request an Attorney General opinion of liability of failing dikes on **Leque Island Unit** and private property

- Evaluate, with Citizen Advisory Group and District Team, current fish and wildlife resource value of pheasant plot parcels and, if appropriate, determine the process for disposal
- Survey **Telegraph Slough Unit**'s boundary - DONE
- Post **Telegraph Slough Unit**'s property boundary - DONE
- Inventory newly acquired **Bald Eagle Natural Area** properties transferred from the Department of Natural Resources
- Begin feasibility study to evaluate potential fish passage options at Johnson Debay's Slough with interested stakeholder groups
- Explore tidal marsh restoration alternatives at Dry Slough
- Continue to work with interested stakeholders to explore restoration and access options at Cottonwood Island
- Work with WDOT and interested stakeholders in establishing fish passage at Telegraph Slough and Hwy. 20
- Begin the Watchable Wildlife subcommittee process to prepare recommendations to present to the District team and CAG for review about watchable wildlife enhancements on Johnson DeBay's Slough Swan Reserve, Fir Island Farms/ Hayton Snow Goose Reserve, Headquarters Restoration and Samish Units. As a part of this process, reconvene the Johnson DeBay Slough Swan Reserve Stewardship Group and develop other stewardships groups as necessary.
- Organize subcommittee groups to suggest workable management options for public use issues (access, sanitation, information needs, conflicting recreational uses, additional recreational lands), dog use issues and wildlife viewing enhancements.

Citizens Advisory Group Input

A Citizens Advisory Group meeting was held on February 13, 2007 to review management progress and address any new issues or input on existing issues. Attendance was limited by a major wreck on I-5 northbound, which was closed for several hours. WDFW staff members present were John Garrett Wildlife Area Manager, Belinda Schuster Asst. Wildlife Area Manager, Doug Hennick Watershed Steward for Snohomish and King County, and Susan Cierebiej Habitat Biologist TAPPS program. CAG members in attendance were Rone Brewer, Art Kendal, Oscar Graham, Steve Hinton, and Tom Rutten. John and Belinda provided a summary update of the most recent activities on the Wildlife Area and the new project opportunities. Susan provided a summary of the scheduled fish passage barrier removal work scheduled for the Snoqualmie to begin on Stillwater this fall. Steve Hinton presented a status update on the Wiley Slough restoration permitting process. He requested CAG comments and input on the public use enhancements that might be incorporated in the current design.

The following new input/issues were addressed at the June 7th meeting.

Issue: Make sure WDFW makes the good faith effort toward addressing public concerns regarding loss of access as a result of the Wiley Slough implementation that the governor demanded.
Response: Steps are underway to develop a committee to work with concerned citizens regarding the loss of access as a result of Wiley Slough Restoration.

Issue: Establish guidelines for building hunting blinds on the Skagit Wildlife Area.
Response: Organize subcommittee groups to suggest workable management options for public use issues (access, sanitation, information needs, conflicting recreational uses, additional recreational lands), dog use issues and wildlife viewing enhancements.

Issue: Consider building an observation platform at the Samish Unit, similar to the one proposed for the Debay Slough area.
Response: Begin the Watchable Wildlife subcommittee process to prepare recommendations to present to the District team and CAG for review about watchable wildlife enhancements on Johnson DeBay's Slough Swan Reserve, Fir Island Farms/ Hayton Snow Goose Reserve, Headquarters Restoration and Samish Units. As a part of this process, reconvene the Johnson DeBay Slough Swan Reserve Stewardship Group and develop other stewardships groups as necessary.

Issue: Will mitigation occur concurrent with the project (access to Replacement lands)?
Response: The timeline for replacement lands has not been determined. Further efforts to address concerns about replacement lands, access options and timelines will be discussed as a part of the Wiley Slough Restoration committee work this summer and fall.

Want to see the full plan?
Go to -
http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/index.htm

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