



Director's Report to the Commission

September 13-14, 2019

Policy and Public Engagement

Congressional Tours

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department), Puget Sound Partnership, and Governor's Salmon Recovery Office hosted the third annual congressional staff tour August 19-21. The focus of the tour was to underscore the importance of federal funding and partnerships, and to articulate the impacts of federal policies. Highlights included a boat tour to Shelton to hear about the West Oakland Bay Restoration Project, the Nisqually Reach for a presentation by David Troutt on behalf of the Nisqually Tribe, and a stop at Chelsea Shellfish to discuss ocean acidification. Additionally, staff traveled to Westport to hear about issues impacting fisheries and local communities, and toured the South Sound prairie to learn about species recovery work and the potential benefits of Recovering America's Wildlife Act. Attendees included staff from the Governor's DC office, and the offices of Representatives Herrera Beutler, Newhouse, Schrier, and Senator Cantwell.

Director Susewind participated in a tour hosted by House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and related agencies. Congressional attendees included Congressman Kilmer, Chairwoman McCollum, and committee staff. The purpose of the tour was to introduce the Congresswoman to issues impacting the Puget Sound to garner to better understand the federal government's role and importance of funding appropriated by her committee to Puget Sound recovery. The tour included stops at Taylor Shellfish, Duckabush, and the Hood Canal Bridge to discuss topics ranging from impacts of changing ocean conditions to significance of habitat restoration in salmon recovery.

Legislative Tours

On August 14 and 16, the Legislative Team hosted orca patrols out of Anacortes to thank legislators for their help passing critical legislation to protect Southern Resident Killer Whales. Representative Fitzgibbon, Shewmake, Lekanoff and Senator Lovelett joined enforcement Sergeant Russ Mullins, Officer Ralph Downes and Officer Taylor Kimball out on the water. The group observed some of our work enforcing the new vessel distance regulations, saw some key habitat restoration and protection work, and met with key partners like Sound Watch, NOAA, and the University of Washington.

Wildlife Program

Mount Saint Helens Wildlife Area Management Plan

The Lands Division, in collaboration with regional and headquarters staff, completed the Mount Saint Helens Wildlife Area management plan. The Mount Saint Helens Wildlife Area is comprised of 18 units in Skamania, Clark, Cowlitz, and Wahkiakum counties and totals 10,002 acres. It is largely managed for elk in the North Fork Toutle River Valley, but the area units are diverse and include a broad range of habitats including old growth forest, forested floodplains, riparian areas, ancient lava flows, mineral springs, tidal mudflats, and wetlands. Merrill Lake is the newest acquisition to the wildlife area, acquired with funds from the Recreation and Conservation Office and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.

The Wildlife Area plan addresses forest management, weed control, riparian and habitat restoration, recreation improvements and management, including managing public access in fragile and rare ecosystems (Merrill Lake Unit). It provides continued support for streambank protection and river channel stabilization in the Mudflow Unit where the channel structures provide critical protection from chronic soil instability, a byproduct of the 1980 Mount Saint Helens eruption, and offers important habitat for salmon and elk. Other focal species in the management plan include the band-tailed pigeon, black-tailed deer, Columbian white-tailed deer, amphibians, and steelhead and bull trout.

Wolf Report

The Department is currently accepting comments on the scope of an updated Wolf Conservation and Management (post-recovery) Plan. The deadline for submitting comments is November 1, 2019, at 5 p.m. The Department will hold three digital open houses to provide information and answer questions regarding wolf post-recovery planning in September and October.

Department staff began reviewing the current status of wolves in Washington with the population projections from the wolf population model developed for the Wolf Conservation and Management Plan for the periodic status review of wolves. As part of that effort, Department staff met with researchers from Wisconsin, Montana and Washington to discuss whether newer modeling tools were available or if updating the existing model parameters with empirical data from Washington wolves would be the best approach.

OPT Pack

On August 16, the Department lethally removed the four known remaining members of the OPT wolf pack. A series of Department investigations had shown the pack responsible for 29 depredation incidents. The Department will provide a final report on this and any other lethal removal operation during 2019 in the Washington Gray Wolf Conservation and Management 2019 Annual Report, which will be published during spring 2020.

Togo Pack

On August 9, lethal removal was reauthorized on the two remaining wolves from the Togo pack in response to repeated depredation of cattle on grazing lands in the Kettle River range of Ferry County. Although the Department has not removed any wolves since the authorization, the lethal removal period is currently ongoing.

Despite a summer of high tensions and localized conflict, 85% of Washington's known wolf packs have not been involved in any documented livestock depredation this year.

Simcoe Phase 5 Land Acquisition

On Friday, August 30, the Department acquired Phase 5 of the Simcoe property in Klickitat County adding 5,088 (+/-) acres of habitat and recreation land to the Simcoe Unit of the Klickitat Wildlife Area. The seller is Western Pacific Timber LLC, and the Simcoe project supports critical habitat for western gray squirrel and winter range for both mule deer and black-tailed deer in the Klickitat area. With the Phase 5 acquisition, the Department has now acquired 10,295 acres of the total 18,745-acre ownership or more than half.

The approach to managing this property is through a long-term partnership between the Department and the Eastern and Central Klickitat Conservation Districts. The groups are working to develop a management plan to ensure a working lands framework of compatible grazing and forestry.

Permit for Critical Access to Facilitate a Cellular Tower on Adjacent Lands

Real Estate Services received federal funder's approval and issued a ten-year commercial permit to a cellular communications company in Ferry County for \$1,000/year. The permit allows the company to cross the Sherman Creek Wildlife Area on an existing road to reach higher ground on private property where a new cell tower will be built to provide reliable broadband service to local businesses, schools, and public agencies.

Fish Program

On August 13, a solicitation was sent out to recruit committee members for a Fishing Guide Industry Ad-Hoc Committee. Once formed, the group will help increase communication and information sharing between the agency and the guide industry. The first task of the group will be to help advise the agency in implementation of new guide logbook regulations. Committee members have been appointed and the first meeting will be held in early October.

Region 2

Bumble Bee Surveys

Biologists conducted bumblebee surveys. One survey effort was organized by the Okanogan Highlands Alliance (OHA) and led by Xerces Society biologist Rich

Hatfield. The effort was part of the Bumble Bee Watch project. Bumble Bee Watch is a collaborative effort to track and conserve North America's bumble bees through community science. Of note, the surveys documented the Western Bumble Bee (a Department Species of Greatest Conservation need) is in decline in much of its range, but appears to be doing well in the Okanogan Highlands. More information about the Bumble Bee Watch project can be found at: <https://www.bumblebeewatch.org/>.

Renewed Agreement with the Colville Tribes

A new five-year agreement was re-negotiated with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation regarding public access, license reciprocity, and enforcement protocols for violations encountered on the reservation. This is a continuation of a highly successful pilot project started in 2007 and is in its third iteration. The agreement is tied to the *Lake Roosevelt Water Sharing agreement* entered into with the Tribes by then Governor Gregoire, and called out specific recreational opportunity and infrastructure improvements to be provided on this reservoir. Funding comes to both the Tribes and the Department for staff costs to patrol the reservoir and for the Tribes to provide access and maintenance at three separate fishing sites where state or tribal fishing licenses are accepted by either entity. Either license is acceptable on the water, and the agreement establishes which venue that a violation will be handled in. Over that last 12 years, the state has provided pass-through funding to the Tribe for staff costs of about \$125,000 per year and additional pass-through Capital Funding for access site development totaling \$3 million. The Tribes are requesting some additional funding be requested on their behalf for inflationary and replacement equipment costs that have come up since the original agreement was signed. Under the Lake Roosevelt Water Agreement framework, Regional Director Brown is working with the Department of Ecology's Office of Columbia River, who administers that master agreement to cooperate, for a 2021 funding request.

Northern Leopard Frog Population Surveys Planned

Over the last few weeks, Region 2 Wildlife biologists have been releasing captive raised juvenile Northern Leopard Frogs in suitable habitats of the Columbia basin in hopes of bolstering populations of this species. Before release, each frog was marked using an elastomer tag. Visual implant elastomers are colorful polymers injected underneath the skin and used to identify batches or cohorts of individuals. By marking each frog, Department biologists will be able to track survival over the next few years. After the tagging process, the frogs were packed and transported to Columbia National Wildlife

Refuge. Another frog release will occur in the next few weeks when the remaining frogs have fully developed. This is the first-ever attempt at this kind of population enhancement for frogs here, and there are high hopes for success.

Proposed Okanogan County Land Purchase for Habitat

Regional Director Brown and Okanogan area Wildlife Program staff have been working with the Okanogan County Board of Commissioners and their planning department on a proposed land acquisition for county road repair needs. The county needs a new

source of crushable rock in the Methow Valley and has found a willing land owner of an ideal site that wants to sell the entire several hundred acres; the county needs a much smaller portion of the parcel. We are working with them to see if we could obtain the portion of the land that they do not need, as part of a future habitat protection and enhancement project by partnering with them. The collaboration between our entities has been outstanding and we are hopeful that this can be a win for the county's citizens and for wildlife habitat.

Pilot Wildlife Fence on Highway 97 in Okanogan County

The Department has entered into a "no cost agreement" for a pilot project fence being built by the Mule Deer Foundation (MDF), in a high roadkill area of Highway 97 in Okanogan County south of Tonasket. The fence is being built to direct mule deer into a crossing *under* an existing bridge and keep these deer off the highway. The agreement is "no cost" because MDF has grant money to build the fence and have agreed to provide manpower and all costs up to \$5,000 for any repairs to the fence. The goal is to fence more of the highway in this area, build a wildlife purposed underpass, and all but eliminate car versus deer accidents in this area, one of the worst stretches of Highway 97.

Region 3

I-90 Wildlife Pass Project

Department staff, including Region 3 Director Mike Livingston and Agency Director Kelly Susewind toured the project on August 15. They were accompanied by Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) Southcentral Region Management, the U.S. Forest Service liaison to the project, and Ted Grudowski, producer of the film *Cascade Crossroads*. The film, featuring I-90, was released earlier this year and has now been shown worldwide at film festivals.

The first two phases of the I-90 Wildlife Pass Project are now nearly complete. WSDOT contractors will complete installing the first 7.5 miles (Hyak to overcrossing) of drift fence this summer, and there will be a ribbon cutting ceremony for completion of Phase 2 of the project/overcrossing in late summer or early fall.

Installed cameras at the new overpass project are collecting videos of deer and coyotes starting to use the wildlife overcrossing even without fencing or vegetation. While the overcrossing is open, there is ongoing construction. Final grading and planting of the wildlife overpass will occur next year. The first American Marten crossing took place earlier this spring using a culvert crossing that drains into Lake Keechelus. Deer and elk have habituated to the Gold Creek crossing and use has increased dramatically compared to pre-project conditions, with more than 3,000 deer and 300 elk confirmed crossings at the Gold Creek crossing site within the first five years of camera monitoring. Other constructed bridges are also detecting a wide array of animals including deer, elk, bobcat and coyote. All wildlife structures have thermal cameras incorporated into the bridges for continued long-term monitoring.

Construction in 2020 will shift to beginning construction on Phase 3 of the project, which is the eastern most 4.5 miles. Phase 3 will incorporate one additional large wildlife overcrossing and three large underpasses, each 100+ in width (one of which will be directly adjacent to Department lands). These large crossing structures are in addition to multiple smaller bridges and widened culverts that will improve passage for aquatic and terrestrial wildlife and fish passage.

Adult Sockeye Salmon Study in the Lower Yakima River

Region 3 Fish Program staff are currently participating in a study aimed at better understanding the migration patterns of sockeye salmon returning to the Yakima River, where a reintroduction effort for the species is underway.

As part of the study – which also includes representatives from the Yakama Tribe, Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Geological Survey, and the Kennewick Irrigation District – 14 sockeye salmon in late-June were collected and tagged at the fish ladder at Prosser Dam. They were then trucked downstream to the mouth of the Yakima River where they were released. In late-July, five boats with 16 volunteer anglers, mostly from the Tri-Cities, helped collect and tag 46 sockeye at the mouth of the Yakima River.

All those sockeye were fitted with radio transmitters and sensors to determine movement and measure temperature. The goal is to have a greater understanding of the migration pattern of sockeye salmon when the lower Yakima River is at its warmest. In addition, the study will help determine if sockeye are using cold water refuges as they migrate upstream, and, if so, where.

This study is a great example of resource managers not only working collaboratively within a region but also involving the community by enlisting the help of citizen volunteers.