



Washington
Department of
**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



Washington State
**Conservation
Commission**

Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration Initiative

Habitat Restoration Program

Responding to unprecedented wildland fires in Washington's shrubsteppe landscape, in 2021 the Washington State Legislature directed Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to collaborate with the State Conservation Commission and Department of Natural Resources to restore shrubsteppe wildlife and habitats impacted by fire. The Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration Initiative (WSRI) is a new approach. With WSRI, we aim to benefit wildlife and communities by coordinating and delivering resources and services at a landscape scale. These resources and services are targeted toward three emphasis areas: 1) wildlife habitat restoration; 2) wildlife friendly fencing; and 3) deferred wildland grazing. Resources are available to all landowners (private, tribal, public) within the footprints of the Pearl Hill, Cold Springs, and Whitney fire boundaries and will be prioritized for wildlife benefit among other considerations.

Beginning **February 14, 2022**, landowners (private, tribal, public) and lessees within the Pearl Hill, Whitney, and Cold Springs fire footprints are eligible to apply for available resources, including materials, services and funding, to implement habitat restoration projects on their lands.

The WSRI wildlife habitat restoration objective is to enhance and restore wildlife habitat, with a special emphasis on benefitting Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in Washington's State Wildlife Action Plan (<https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/at-risk/swap>). We aim to expand native, perennial plant communities where they remain, and to reestablish them where they have been lost. In this solicitation, we aim to support projects that will achieve this objective in shrubsteppe and riparian habitats.



- ***Shrubsteppe.*** Grass is the foundation of shrubsteppe habitat, as it both protects soil against erosion and competes effectively with weeds. Specifically, native bunchgrasses dominate early to mid-successional stages of shrubsteppe and are relatively resilient to wildfire. Forbs accompany grasses in these successional stages, and while they exert less competitive pressure against weeds, they are a crucial component in the diets of

many species. Shrubs offer additional habitat structure for breeding, feeding and sheltering; sagebrush specifically is the primary food of some species. While many shrubsteppe forbs flower after fire, waning in intervals between fires, shrubs are often killed by fire and are slow to reestablish. Consequently, shrubs are often naturally sparse for long periods after fire. Collectively, grasses, forbs and shrubs provide the patchwork mosaic of diverse nutritional value and habitat structure required by wildlife species that inhabit shrubsteppe. More information is available at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/ecosystems/shrubsteppe>.

- *Riparian*. Riparian habitat especially offers crucially important habitat value to wildlife. In Eastern Washington's shrubsteppe landscape, riparian areas of intermixed trees and shrubs typically adjoin uplands of bunchgrasses with a shrub overstory, offering diverse microhabitats. These provide natural corridors between foraging areas, breeding areas, and seasonal ranges, and they provide protected dispersal routes for young. Further, riparian vegetation shades streams, stabilizes stream banks (through plant roots), moderates streamflow, contributes to bed and bank configuration, and sheds leaves, twigs, and insects to streams, thereby maintaining water quality, creating habitat features, and providing food for fish and other aquatic wildlife. More information is available at <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/ecosystems/riparian#desc-range>.

True reestablishment of native plant communities can take decades; submitted projects should demonstrate:

- Long-term commitment to establishing native, perennial plant communities, with practices designed to leave sites with them or encourage recruitment of such communities over time; and
- Careful planning and implementation, with adaptive management to selectively favor establishment by locally adapted, native ecotypes.

Applications for WSRI resources:

All project applications in this WSRI solicitation will be evaluated for benefit to Species of Greatest Conservation Need and other wildlife in the context of important spatial data sets, including breeding habitats, Habitat Concentration Areas, and ALI Priority Core and Priority Linkage Areas. Further, selection panels will consider current and future land use, likelihood of project success, long-term commitment to wildlife habitat, and overall wildlife value. Restoration applications will also be evaluated on how well they are likely to achieve the restoration objective described above and leverage other funding and resources.

All projects within the Pearl Hill, Whitney and Cold Springs fire footprints will be reviewed for resources and services, but special consideration will be given to those within:

- Pygmy Rabbit Recovery Areas; and
- Important breeding and wintering habitats for Greater Sage-grouse and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse.

Kurt Merg (Kurt.Merg@dfw.wa.gov, 509 288-7067), the Shrubsteppe Restoration Coordinator, is available to consult on project applications. The first round of applications will be reviewed starting on March 1, 2022, and then on an ongoing basis until the funds are fully expended.

Effective habitat restoration can take many years. Here WSRI aims to support restoration work conducted through June 2023; applicants may seek future support for ongoing needs in longer-term projects. Submitted projects should reflect thorough planning, and include restoration objectives, proposed restoration activities with total cost and a timeline, and anticipated wildlife benefits. The long-term vision of WSRI is to expand shrubsteppe restoration in Washington by filling critical gaps in resources and services. However, these are currently limited as we build the infrastructure to realize this vision. In this solicitation, we welcome applications for the following resources and services to facilitate restoration activities that contribute to meeting the habitat objective described above.

- 1) *Materials*. WSRI currently has limited quantities of plant materials (seed, sagebrush plugs) and herbicides. Applications should identify anticipated materials needed to implement the project; existing WSRI materials will be allotted to selected projects and additional funding may be provided to fulfill other material needs.
- 2) *Field assistance*. WSRI can support the implementation of projects through two, five-person Washington Conservation Corps crews already contracted to assist with projects requiring hand crews. Applications should identify anticipated on-the-ground labor needed to implement the project; crews will be assigned to selected projects as appropriate or additional funding may be provided to contract specialized services.
- 3) *Cultural Resource Review*. Projects supported by WSRI are subject to Cultural Resources (CR) review and consultation requirements consistent with Governor's Executive Order 21-02. WDFW is prepared to assist with CR requirements associated (e.g., consultation and survey) with implementation of selected projects on all non-federal lands. Where cultural resource review has already been initiated/conducted for selected projects, we will work with the applicant to ensure that WDFW responsibilities under GEO 21-02 are met. We will defer to Section 106 consultation conducted by federal partners for projects on federal lands.
- 4) *Funding*. Funding awards may be provided in recognition that the labor and materials currently available through WSRI are unlikely to wholly address project needs. WSRI has approximately \$240,000 to award to projects seeking funding assistance to supplement available WSRI resources and services. Funding awards must be expended by June 30, 2023 and will require a contract between the applicant and WDFW.