

Wells Wildlife Area

2019 - 2020 Management Plan Update



Central Ferry Canyon

This document is intended to highlight accomplishments as they relate to goals and objectives identified within the [2006 Wells Wildlife Area Management Plan](#). The plan addresses the status of wildlife species and their habitats, ongoing restoration efforts, and public recreation opportunities on the Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area. Every 10 years, WDFW revises management plans for each wildlife area to identify new management priorities and actions. Updates will be published at two-year intervals to describe accomplishments that occur between plan revisions.

Management Highlights

Annual Food Plots (Objective 1, Tasks 1 & 2)

In 2019, 172 acres of irrigated grain crops were produced on the Bridgeport Bar and Washburn Island units. The acreage was distributed across 20 individual fields ranging in size from a half-acre to 28 acres. Spring planting consisted of 82 acres of spring wheat, 32 acres of corn, 17 acres of millet, and 6 acres of buckwheat. Pre-seeding prep work included herbicide applications, disking, and fertilizing. Post-seeding maintenance consisted of herbicide applications and fertilizing. In September, planting consisted of 36 acres of winter wheat.

In contrast, 2020 spring field work was prevented by work restrictions and a stay-at-home proclamation from Governor Inslee in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic. The stay-at-home orders began in early April and weren't fully lifted until mid-June. Once those restrictions were relaxed, the time had passed for planting spring wheat. Instead, staff members planted 20 acres

of corn and 20 acres of buckwheat, and summer fallowed the remaining 130 acres until late summer, when those acres were seeded with winter wheat.



Winter wheat field at Washburn Island. It gets planted in September and is green and lush in March, when it's used heavily by migrating waterfowl. Photo from 2015.

Noxious Weed Control (*Objective 2, Task 1*)

Staff members kept busy chasing after an increasing suite of noxious weeds. Weed species treated include Dalmatian toadflax, diffuse knapweed, Russian knapweed, Russian thistle, cereal rye, annual bursage, kochia, rush skeletonweed, crabgrass, and a variety of other annual weed species. In all, nearly 500 acres were treated. Treatment methods included chemical and mechanical, as well as the release of biocontrols. Treatment sites included the annual food plots at the Bridgeport Bar and Washburn Island units, roadsides, parking areas, firebreaks, and weed patches. Many of the above sites received multiple treatments during the growing season to ensure coverage. Treatment of the roads is a priority due to their function as a disturbance and dispersal vector for weeds. The Indian Dan Canyon and Central Ferry Canyon units each received 1,000 *Mecinus janthinus* to address large infestations of Dalmatian toadflax. The recently available *Aulacidea acroptilonica*, a gall forming wasp to address Russian knapweed, was acquired and releases were made on the Central Ferry Canyon, Indian Dan Canyon, and Okanogan River units.



Mecinus janthinus hard at work

Wildfire Control (Objective 2, Task 3)

A 14-acre wildfire in July 2019 burned native habitat on the Bridgeport Bar Unit. Losses included mature antelope bitterbrush, some riparian trees and shrubs, a fence that faced Moe Road, and an irrigation gun. In the months that followed, staff cleaned up debris, replaced the fence and irrigation gun, mowed skeletons of bitterbrush, and finally, in November, drill seeded the area with native grasses and forbs. In June of 2020, following the relaxation of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, staff members planted water birch, juniper, Douglas fir, and cottonwood to replace the trees lost to the fire.



Seeding site of Moe Road fire - November 2019

Public Recreation (*Objective 3, Task 1*)

In 1978, the Wells Wildlife Area began a hunter registration program to track what was at the time the area's primary purpose: to enhance and manage habitat for game species and associated recreation for the time, i.e., hunting. This reporting period marks the 41st and 42nd years of this registration program. During these two years, the total number of hunter visits recorded were 3,175. Broken down by the number of registrations per game targeted, there were: 1,486 upland hunters, 1,346 waterfowl hunters, 236 deer hunters, and 107 mourning dove hunters. Relative to past years, there were fewer upland bird hunters than the 40-year average, and higher than average numbers of waterfowl hunters. On the non-consumptive recreation front, anecdotal information suggests that the area is visited by an increasing number of people seeking opportunities for bird watching, cycling, hiking, fishing, kayaking, and canoeing.



A good day's hunt

Buildings, Public Use Facilities and Equipment (*Objective 4, Tasks 1 & 2*)

The Department completed the construction of a 1,200 square foot storage building on the Bridgeport Bar Unit. Complete with two overhead doors, cement floor, interior and exterior lighting, and 200-amp single phase 240-volt electric service, the building provides additional storage and maintenance space. It replaces structures at the Indian Dan Canyon Unit that were destroyed in the 2014 Carlton Complex Fire. Funding was provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The building was constructed by Bozco Construction.

A Department construction crew installed vault toilets at the two most heavily used access areas on the Bridgeport Bar Unit: the Headquarters Water Access Area, and the Mountell Road parking area. At the water access area, a rock pile that partly blocked launching boats was removed, and a 72'x12' articulated concrete mat was installed. This will provide recreationists with a level and solid surface that ensures safe launching and loading, as well as the ability to do so in low water conditions. Other improvements at this site included leveling and surfacing of the

parking area, and the addition of motion-activated lights. The Mountell Road parking area was leveled, graded, and covered with new gravel. This project cost \$258,000 and was funded by a State Lands Development grant administered by the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office.



Bridgeport Bar boat launch before, during...



...and after construction

New Issues

Pearl Hill Fire

Labor Day, Sept. 7, 2020, is known as the “worst Labor Day ever.” In the early morning hours, the Cold Springs Canyon Fire, which had started in neighboring Okanogan County the night before, jumped the Columbia River into Douglas County. By midnight, the Pearl Hill Fire had burned a north to south swath 30 miles long and 23 miles wide, encompassing 224,000 acres through the middle of the county. Two units were impacted by the fire: Bridgeport Bar and West

Foster Creek. At Bridgeport Bar, just less than four acres burned when the fire jumped State Highway 173. Damage was limited to two irrigation risers that were broken when a dozer line was built. Eleven miles to the south, at West Foster Creek, losses were limited to approximately 600 acres thanks to a timely dozer line carved through the middle of the unit. Within the burn perimeter, habitat losses were severe. All the unit's natural water birch groves were burned, and many trees were destroyed. These trees are critically important in winter for the imperiled Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, who use them as a primary forage source throughout winter months. Other habitat features destroyed were mature tree and shrub plantings established between 1980 and 1997. Infrastructure lost included 2.2 miles of boundary fence, 1,300 feet of deer fence, two upland bird feeders, and one registration booth. On the positive side of the ledger, within the unburned portion of the area, the largest tree and shrub plantings, established in 1996 by former manager Marc Hallet, were spared. In late September and early October, windstorms stripped inches of soil from the land, leaving the roots and crowns of grasses exposed. At times, visibility was less than a few hundred feet. The resulting environment was challenging to work in and often likened to that of Mordor.



The Pearl Hill Fire makes a run on the Bridgeport Bar Unit



A well timed and placed dozer line saved 500 acres of West Foster Creek

Staff members collected the melted remains of plastic deer fence and irrigation pipe, rebuilt road entry gates, began reconstruction of deer fence, and built and placed a new registration booth and upland bird feeders. Anticipating that the fire affected area would receive a federal disaster declaration, data collection began to document the full extent of damage to infrastructure. Lucky staff members had to tally the total number of wood posts, steel posts, signs, irrigation components, and bird boxes destroyed or otherwise damaged, plus the total mileage of fence damaged and number of wires on fence. A survey of existing water birch stands found regrowth at the base of many trees. Subsequently, woven wire field fence was placed around as many trees as possible to protect them from deer browsing. Left unprotected, such browsing would inhibit or prevent the trees from regenerating. In the coming years, recovery efforts will focus on reestablishing water birch and other native trees and shrubs, weed control, and seeding native grasses and forbs in severely burned areas.



The grim landscape of West Foster Creek



Grass condition following windstorm. Prior to the storms, the blacken tops were level with the ground.