

Progress Report on the Development of a Statewide Fish Passage Barrier Removal Strategy

Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, Washington Department of Transportation, and Brian Abbott Fish Barrier Removal Board

October 2023

The Washington State legislature's 2020 Supplemental Capital Budget and Transportation provisos tasked the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT), and the Brian Abbott Fish Passage Barrier Removal Board (FBRB) to develop a comprehensive statewide strategy for fish passage (or the strategy for short). The intent of this strategy is to focus the efforts of all culvert correction programs into a single strategic approach to maximize the salmon and orca recovery benefits from the public investment. The comprehensive strategy is to guide the funding recommendations of the FBRB, and as well as other state fish passage barrier correction programs.

In July and October of 2022 respectively, WDFW hired a Fish Passage Strategist and contracted with Cramer Fish Sciences and Triangle & Associates to undertake strategy development. These hires in addition to WDFW Habitat Program's fish passage division manager form the Fish Passage Strategy Project team. Within WDFW there is also a leadership team that provides key policy input and decision-making around the effort. The project team has crafted a framework to launch the development of the strategy in coordination with the leadership team beginning with outreach first to tribal co-managers and then to key stakeholders. WDFW leadership, the project team, and the agency's tribal liaison held a virtual briefing for all 29 federally recognized tribes in the state in March 2023. Since that time agency leadership has offered and met with interested tribal parties and the tribal liaison provides updates to the tribes via email with significant updates to the strategy.

Triangle Associates conducted a situation assessment interview process where they reached out to key stakeholders at the executive leadership level to engage them early in the process and communicate accurate information about the goals of the effort (Table 1). In addition, they in turn asked questions to hear the stakeholders' candid insights into what a successful strategy would look like to them, what concerns they may have, and how a strategy can better inform their fish passage programs. The results of the assessments had some common themes and described a range of values.

The natural resource values expressed include salmon recovery, population viability, and watershed function and resilience. The implementation values reflected include leveraging specific regional expertise and existing strategies, economics and focused investments, partnership and collaboration, and focusing funding and efforts in a coordinated way. Stakeholder barriers and challenges include funding, capacity, and partnerships. Many organizations are working to implement projects with limited funding and resources, and many do not have the staff capacity to focus on fish passage barrier projects. And lastly, organizations expressed the lack of state resources and partnerships with landowners needed to focus their efforts.

1	Washington Department of Transportation
2	Lower Columbia Fish Recovery Board
3	Snake River
4	Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation
5	Yakima Basin Fish & Wildlife Recovery Board
6	Governor’s Salmon Recovery Office & Recreation and Conservation Office
7	Association of Washington Cities
8	Upper Columbia Fish Recovery Board
9	Kalispel Tribe of Indians
10	Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group
11	Coast Salmon Partnership
12	Puget Sound Partnership
13	Washington State Association of Counties

Table 1. Stakeholders who participated in the situation assessment.

The project team next worked to convene a science panel consisting of experts in fields of fisheries, fluvial geomorphology, lifecycle modeling, geographic information science, and restoration among other relevant experience to participate in meetings over the course of a year to ensure a strong scientific foundation for the strategy (Table 2). The role of the panel is to provide scientific recommendations in support of a technically sound strategy that helps to prioritize and reduce barriers to fish passage in a way that benefits depressed, threatened, and endangered stocks, and that is informed by the best available science.

1	Pete Bisson	Retired United States Forest Service
2	Ken Currens	Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission
3	Robby Fonner	NOAA Northwest Fisheries Science Center
4	Jason Nuckols	The Nature Conservancy
5	Robyn Peppin	Aspect Consulting
6	George Pess	NOAA Northwest Fisheries Science Center
7	Dan Auerbach	WDFW Habitat Science Division
8	Thomas Buerhens	WDFW Fish Science Division

Table 2. Fish Passage Barrier Removal Prioritization Strategy Science Panel.

As of October 2023, the science panel has had three meetings where they have heard presentations on and discussed the existing barrier removal prioritization tools both in Washington State and regionally and made some decisions on the statewide approach that they would like to recommend to WDFW. The strategy will be designed to be transparent and repeatable so that it can be updated as additional data become available.

In early 2024, the project team will begin a mid-process check in where they will gather input and share draft strategy elements with key partners and stakeholders, including those in Table 1, in support of the development of recommendations. Later in 2024, the project team will host implementation workshops to demonstrate to tribal co-managers and stakeholders how their feedback was incorporated into the strategy and communicate the technical information generated by the science panel and technical team. But the end of 2024, the project team anticipates completing the final draft Strategy for review and revision.