

Draft Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission

Conservation Policy

Note: *FWC Big Tent Committee version that was edited on December 14, 2023 for FWC consideration on December 15, 2023; with the Big Tent recommendation that it is opened for public comment from December 18, 2023-January 12, 2024.*

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Signed by: Barbara Baker, Fish and Wildlife Commission Chair

Purpose: The purpose of this policy is to affirm our commitment to conserving our state's fish and wildlife populations and their habitats, and to sustainably manage fish and wildlife populations to meet the needs of current and future generations.

As trustees tasked with managing fish and wildlife resources in the public trust, conservation of fish, wildlife, and habitat is the paramount responsibility of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Achieving the Department's mandate under RCW 77.04.012 is becoming increasingly difficult with the amplified effects of climate change, growing human population and development resulting in fragmented or lost habitat, invasive species, and increasing disease. We recognize that humankind is in the midst of a biodiversity extinction crisis and we must continue to act while we still have the building blocks for success. The Department's 25-Year Strategic Plan lays out a roadmap for implementing the Department's mandate and addressing these conservation challenges, therefore building on that the Commission sets the following policy guidance.

Definitions:

Conservation – Science-informed actions to perpetuate the health, resilience, and intrinsic value of native species and natural ecosystems.

Ecosystem – A community of organisms and their physical environment viewed as a system of interacting and interdependent relationships.

Ecosystem-based management – A comprehensive management approach that protects and/or restores the function, structure, and species composition of an ecosystem, recognizing that all components are interrelated.

Sustainability – The management of fish and wildlife resources in ways and rates that maintain and enhance the integrity and resilience of ecosystems and the benefits that such provide to current and future generations.

Principles:

- 1) *Conservation first*** — The WDFW’s top priority is the conservation of Washington’s fish, shellfish, and wildlife for the benefit of all state residents, current and future. Successful conservation is the foundation supporting the spectrum of values that Washington residents hold regarding providing sustainable recreational and commercial opportunities including, but not limited to, hunting, fishing, and wildlife appreciation.
- 2) *Conservation of all species, habitat, and ecosystems*** — To preserve functioning, resilient, and healthy ecosystems, the WDFW shall strive to conserve fish, shellfish, and wildlife, whether rare or common, and their habitats through ecosystem-based management. Doing so is essential to maintain species diversity.
- 3) *Conservation partnerships*** — An ecosystem-based management approach requires strong coordination, cooperation, and collaboration with local, state, federal, and tribal governments, non- governmental organizations, private landowners, academia, businesses, and engaged residents. Collaboration with neighboring states and Canada is also important because fish and wildlife distributions are not constrained by political boundaries. The Commission recognizes that Washington’s population is diverse and growing, and that everyone relies on and has a stake in healthy fish and wildlife and intact ecosystems to support our quality of life. Therefore, the Commission’s outreach and resultant policies need to be inclusive of both traditional stakeholders and the broader public in order to foster the necessary partnerships to accomplish its mission.
- 4) *Knowledge and science*** — WDFW actions and decisions shall be informed by objective, science-based knowledge. Scientific efforts to inform the WDFW must be sufficiently broad and multi-disciplinary, combining all related scientific fields (e.g., biological, ecological, economic, and social) as well as other sources of information such as traditional ecological knowledge and local knowledge. Adaptive management is a critical and required step to implement actions learned from monitoring the decisions and actions against the results. Adaptive management thus informs necessary changes to meet the desired outcomes.
- 5) *Risk and uncertainty*** — Many, if not all, management challenges faced by the WDFW involve some degree of uncertainty and risk to fish and wildlife. Human population growth and expansion resulting in habitat degradation, or loss, and climate change are examples where the uncertainty and risk may be substantial. Therefore, the WDFW shall seek to identify and account for risks to the conservation of fish, wildlife, and habitat when deciding whether or not to pursue a proposed action. The identified risks shall form the foundation for monitoring and adaptive management of those decisions or actions.

6) Innovative leadership and solutions — Fish and wildlife management challenges are exacerbated by our rapidly changing world. In response, the WDFW must be more innovative and determined in our conservation efforts. Innovation does not always lead to success, but the WDFW must be willing to make hard decisions, and on occasion make course corrections, in order to learn and to develop the understanding and competence needed to fulfill the mandate.

7) Aligning mandate, strategy, staff, and budget — To achieve the mandate expressed in RCW 77.04.012, the WDFW must develop the necessary strategies, enlist the necessary staff, and secure the necessary resources. To that end, the WDFW must strengthen its communications to the public, State Legislature, and Governor regarding the need for expanded partnerships, additional authorities, and funding.

Tribal considerations: The Commission respects and appreciates the status of the tribes as sovereign nations. Their traditional ecological knowledge and their connections to the land and waters offer key insights into how to conserve fish, wildlife and lands in Washington. For that reason, nothing in this policy is designed to interpret, expand, impede or minimize tribal rights, nor does this policy replace current or future individual WDFW-tribal memoranda of agreement, consultation plans, co-management agreements or any other agreements between WDFW and any tribe or tribes.

**As referenced in this policy, “WDFW” means all facets of the agency, including the Department, the Director, and the Commission.*

The foregoing policy, including its guiding principles, shall be incorporated by the WDFW in the development and approval of the budget, planning, management, and decision-making processes.