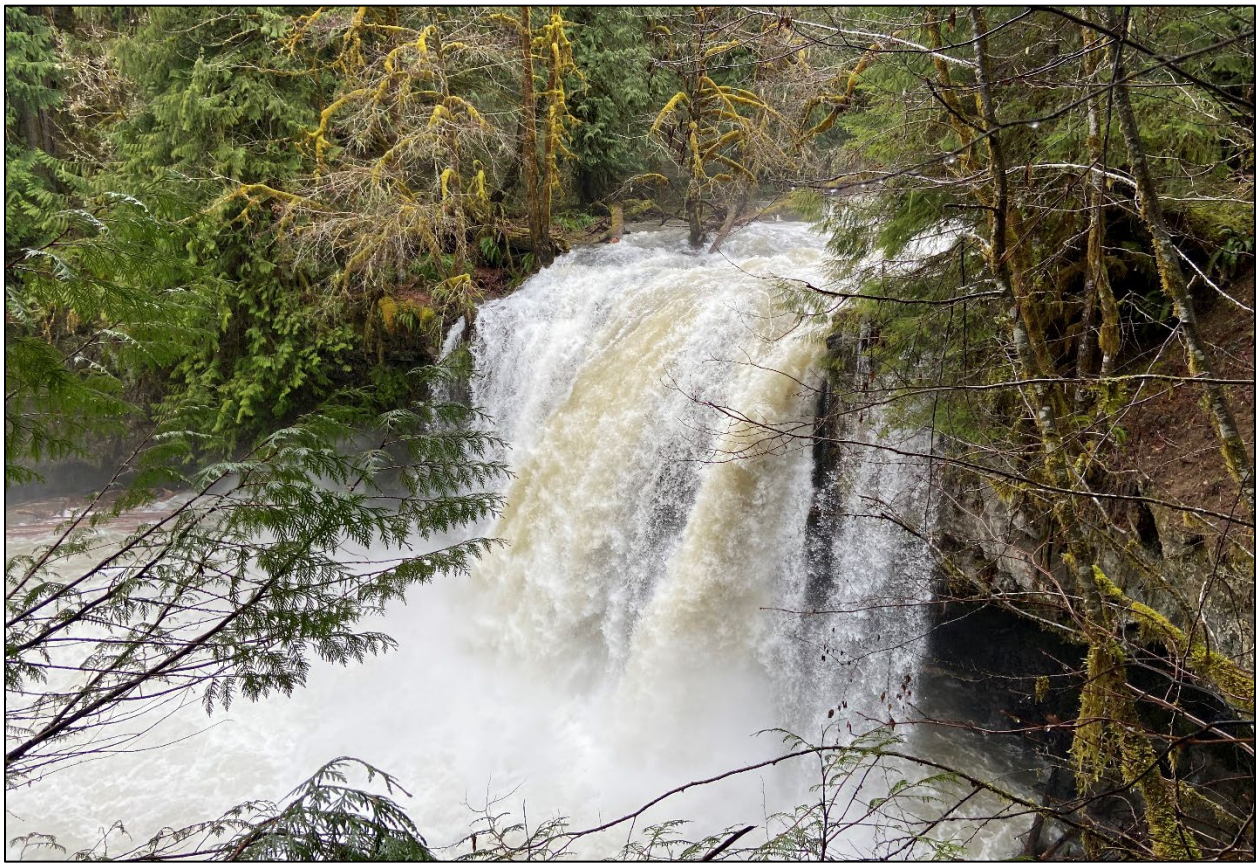
Mount St. Helens Wildlife Area

2021-22 Wildlife Area Plan Update

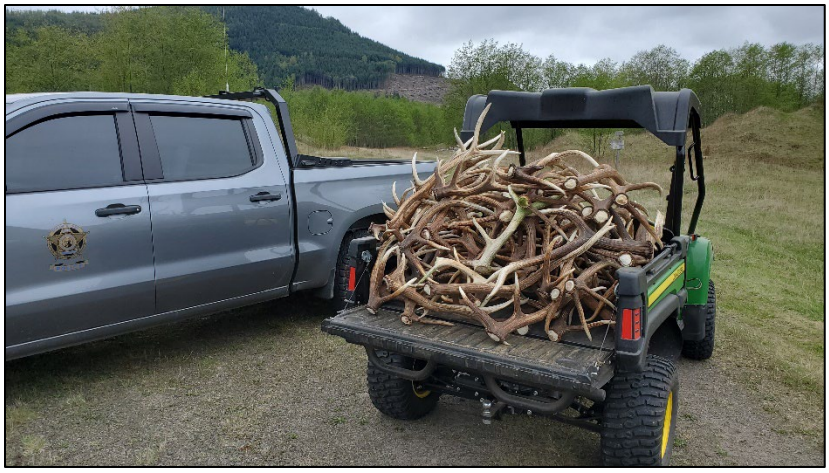


Kalama River Falls on the Merrill Lake Unit.

This document is intended to highlight accomplishments as they relate to goals and objectives identified within the 2019 Mount Saint Helens Wildlife Area Management Plan. The plan addresses the status of wildlife species and their habitat, ongoing restoration efforts, and public recreation opportunities at the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area. Every 10 years, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) develops a process for revising the management plans for each wildlife area to identify new management priorities and actions. In between plan revisions, the update focuses on recent accomplishments over the last two years.

Management Highlights

Mudflow Unit Winter Closure Enforcement (Goal #3, Objective B and Goal #4, Objective I)



Antlers collected and confiscated during the 2020-21 winter closure of the Mudflow Unit.

The Mudflow Unit has been a very popular location with shed hunters for decades. To reduce disturbance and minimize mortalities to wintering elk herds caused by this recreational traffic, a closure was instated in 2006 restricting all public access from Dec. 1 through April 30 every year. Despite this closure, many people still trespass in the wildlife area to poach antlers during the late winter and early spring months. These rule violators would almost entirely clean the area of all the antlers, so that by the time the area opened back up to the public on May 1, virtually no antlers were left for the legal hunters to find. That began to change in 2021, when WDFW Enforcement began emphasis patrols on the Mudflow Unit to stop the trespass violators. Many lawbreakers were caught by Enforcement Officers, resulting in the confiscation of dozens of antlers that were unlawfully collected on the unit. Wildlife area staff would also collect antlers as they encountered them while working in the field, to reduce the temptation and reward of those that violated the closure. All antlers that are collected and/or confiscated are placed back on the wildlife area, near where they were originally found, on the day before the unit opens back up to the public, thereby allowing the public an opportunity to find multiple sheds on May 1. In subsequent years after the initial emphasis in 2021, trespass and rule violations to the winter closure have decreased substantially. However, through the months of March and April, Enforcement Officers still patrol the area daily to deter antler poachers.

Deer Creek Fish Release Site Planning (Goal #5, Objective C)

WDFW continues to work with the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers to develop a new release site for salmon and steelhead on Deer Creek. Once the site is constructed, this will be the third release area above the Sediment Retention Structure (SRS). Currently there is no volitional fish passage over the SRS, so fish are trapped below the structure and then trucked upstream to be released into either Alder or Bear Creek, where they spawn. These two creeks are reaching their carrying capacity for spawning and rearing juvenile salmonids. To aid in the recovery of salmon in the North Fork Toutle River watershed, access to additional tributaries is needed to provide

habitat and increase overall carrying capacity for salmonids. The development of the Deer Creek site is part of the larger spillway raise project on the SRS that is designed to increase the retention of sediment from the Mt. St. Helens debris flow and to maintain specific flood control measures downstream on the Toutle and Cowlitz Rivers. Construction of the release site may happen as early as 2024.

Deer Creek, tributary of the North Fork Toutle River.

Maintain and Enhance Habitats for Band-tailed Pigeons (Goal #4, Objective Fand G)
Several of the units of the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area have available habitat for band-tailed pigeons. Cedar Creek and Jenny Creek units are two unique locations providing essential minerals for breeding and rearing of young. The Cedar Creek mineral spring is currently the only spring being used, as the springs at Jenny Creek are no longer accessible due to stream channel migration as well as siltation, residential development, and increased vehicle traffic on the adjacent road. Over the course of the past two years staff have caged many of the native fruit-bearing trees that were planted in the Jenny and Cedar Creek units, as they were being over-browsed by deer and elk. Placing 5–6-foot cages around the trees allows the trees to grow above the grazing height of deer and elk. Once mature the trees will produce fruit for pigeons and other birds for forage. Some brush was also cleared at the Cedar Creek site to lessen the chances of predation when the pigeons were utilizing the spring. Due to unusually warm and dry summers a couple of small depressions were dug out at the spring site to provide better access to the mineral water.

Cedar Creek mineral site.

New Issues

Alder Creek Diversion Structure and Rearing Pond (Goal #4, Objective B)

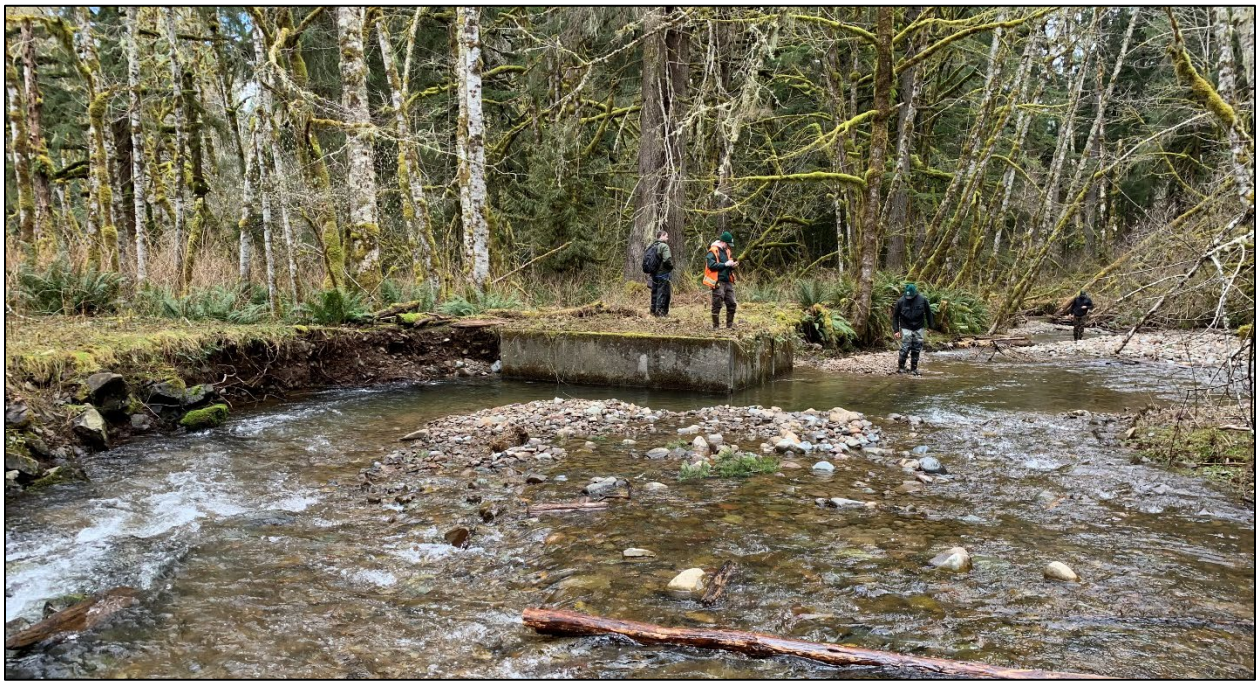
In the late 1970s the WDFW constructed a water diversion structure on Alder Creek that supplied water to a rearing pond where juvenile steelhead were raised to be released into the creek to provide fishing opportunities. The infrastructure was built on a small piece of property, which is now part of the larger Hoffstadt Unit.

The fish-rearing and water-delivery system was only in operation for a few years, until the Mt. St. Helens eruption on May 18, 1980, after which all fish production ceased, and the site was abandoned. Fast forward almost 40 years and the failing diversion structure on the creek is diverting water from Alder Creek during low flow periods, resulting in a section of the stream becoming dry.\Significant erosion adjacent to the structure has caused a high likelihood of a catastrophic avulsion event which could result in a stream channel change and the loss of a half-mile of prime salmon habitat. Additionally, fish that swim into the diversion channel can end up in the old rearing pond, becoming trapped.

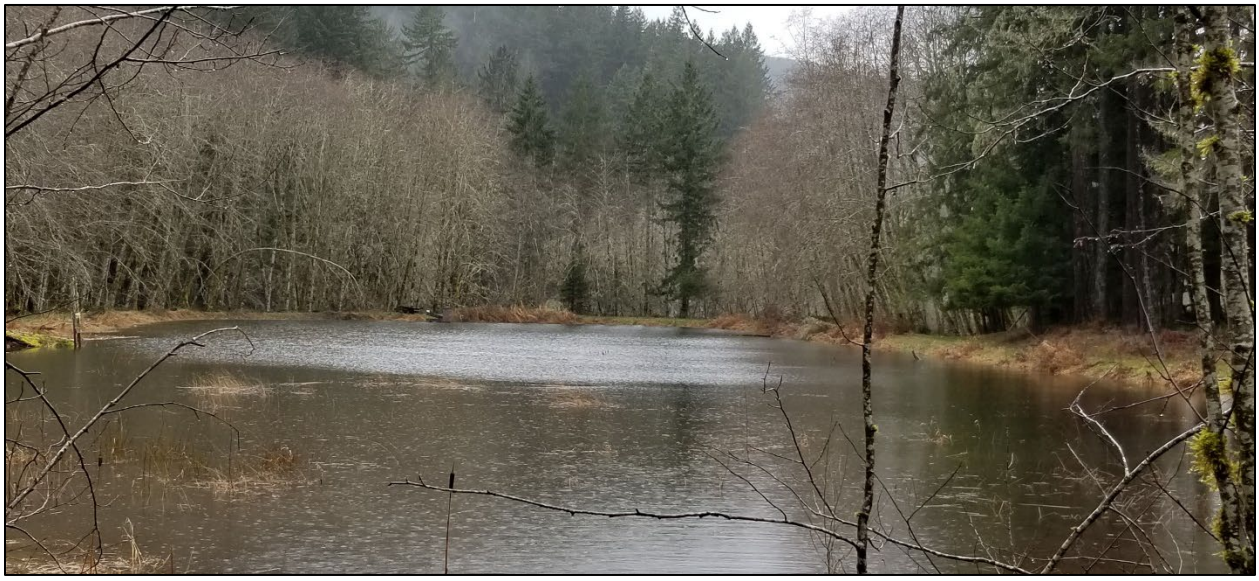
A solution to potential habitat loss and fish entrapment would be decommissioning the diversion structure. The plan for the rearing pond is to leave it intact and enhance the existing wetland for amphibian habitat. Since the pond would no longer be filled by diverting water from Alder Creek, the plan is to restore part of the original project design and use surface water to fill the pond. Once full, overflowing water would exit the pond through a water control structure and re-enter Alder Creek.

There has been a site visit with the permitting agencies for the decommissioning of the diversion structure and modification to the rearing pond, with unanimous support. The delay for

implementing the project has been a lack of available funding. The project is currently on WDFW's Capital Project List, however it is uncertain when the project might be completed.



Alder Creek Diversion Structure.



Old Rearing Pond at full capacity.