

Oak Creek Wildlife Area

2021 – 2022 Management Plan Update

This document is intended to highlight accomplishments as they relate to goals and objectives identified within the [2018 Oak Creek Wildlife Area Management Plan](#). The plan addresses the status of wildlife species and their habitat, ongoing restoration efforts, and public recreation opportunities at the Oak Creek 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

Cowiche Unit, Expansion and Enhancement of Wintering Habitat (Goal 1 & 10)

The Oak Creek Wildlife Area acquired approximately 290 acres immediately adjacent to the Cowiche winter elk feeding area and approximately 4,200 additional acres further west within the same Cowiche Creek watershed for a total of nearly 4,500 acres. These recent acquisitions have expanded the wintering habitat and migration corridors for elk, mule deer, and other fish and wildlife species in the Cowiche Unit.

To improve the ecological integrity of these lands, the initial needs of each property were assessed and preliminary habitat improvement projects have been completed. These projects include the removal of dilapidated buildings and vehicles, implementation of the annual weed management plan, replacement of 2 miles of boundary fence, and implementation of four miles of riparian exclusion fence for grazing cattle.



A densely populated Scotch thistle patch discovered on newly acquired Cowiche lands.



Cowiche Watershed and example of habitat on newly acquired Cowiche lands.

Forest Management Through Commercial Thinning, Non-commercial Thinning, and Prescribed Fire (Goal 2)

Upland forestry stand management was completed on 235 broadcast burning acres of the Cougar Canyon Prescribed Fire in spring of 2021 and fall of 2022.

A total of 349 acres of commercial thinning were completed in December of 2022 as part of the Windy Point Commercial Thin Project. This treatment improved the ecological integrity of the area by stimulating growth of healthy conifers and reducing stocking and ladder fuels to create a more fire-resilient stand and lower stocking to the historic range of variability and species composition. Furthermore, dominant Oregon white oak were released from being encroached by overtopping conifers (**Goal 3**). Another benefit to the project was the creation of snags across the landscape with mechanical harvesting equipment. Select trees were identified and marked as candidates for snag creation (**Goal 2.D**)

Finally, 980 acres were also treated by non-commercial thinning activities, and associated piling and burning to mitigate slash hazards in key areas such as roadsides.



Oregon white oak post release as part of the Windy Point commercial thin.

Maintaining Recreation Activities (Goal 11)

One of the priorities of the Oak Creek Wildlife Area is to provide sustainable recreational opportunities that are compatible with fish and wildlife stewardship (Goal 11.E). To support appropriate recreational opportunities, the Oak Creek Wildlife Area coordinates with the Friends of Oak Creek volunteers to staff the visitor's center and operate the feed site tours during winter elk feeding operations. Volunteers also help staff at various annual events including assistance with the opening of the winter closure areas and associated elk shed antler hunting, hunter information during modern firearm hunting seasons, and liter pick up.

The Oak Creek Wildlife Area also aims to support appropriate recreational opportunities through the improvement of signs and kiosks. Regular maintenance and upgrades to kiosks and signage is completed annually throughout the wildlife area, including the updating of Green Dot road guidelines signage, and a new kiosk was constructed on the Reynolds Creek Road in the Cowiche Unit.



New Road Management Rules sign on Clemens Mountain.

New Issues

Tieton River Nature Trail Connection (Goal 11)

Oak Creek Wildlife Area provides an abundance of recreational opportunities including many designated trails. The newly acquired Bear Canyon provides an opportunity to establish a new 1-mile trail connection to the popular Tieton River Nature Trail. The new trail will include hiking, mountain biking, and wildlife viewing while minimizing impacts to the environment.

South Fork Cowiche Creek - Restore Riparian and Instream Habitat (Goal 10.B)

The Oak Creek Wildlife Area acquired approximately 4,200 acres of private land in the Cowiche watershed. The property contains approximately 4.5 miles of streams and riparian areas along South Fork Cowiche Creek and 2 miles along Reynolds Creek. S. F. Cowiche and Reynolds Creek are designated bull trout and steelhead habitat. The Recreation and Conservation Office and Department of Ecology provided funding to cover initial management. The funding included construction and improvements to riparian management, including installing boundary and cattle exclusion fencing, spring development, and grazing monitoring.

Stream and riparian data collection identified habitat conditions for future restoration projects. As a result, it was determined that Reynolds Creek is prime habitat for beaver reintroductions. Beaver activity promotes riparian forest health, water quality, and overall ecological function. Plans are being developed to address beaver reintroduction and relocations.

Current coordination with the Yakama Nation aims to improve flows and fish passage through the implementation of the S. F. Cowiche Stream Recovery Project. The overall objectives of the project are to improve fish habitat for spawning and rearing through enhancing natural system processes of floodplain connectivity/in-stream habitat complexity. Cultural reviews have been completed and implementation of a series of beaver dam analogs and post assisted log structures within the next two years may occur pending funding.



Example of unstable banks found on S. F. Cowiche Creek.