

ISLAND UNIT ADVISORY GROUP

Meeting Summary

Monday March 8th, 2021 • 5:00 to 7:00 pm

Via Conference Call and Online Meeting

Participants

Advisory Group Members

Rick Billieu
Richard Brocksmith
Reb Broker
Bob Cooper
Roger Goodan
Jed Holmes
James Ono
Jeff Osmundson
Amber Parmenter
Brandon Roozen
John Stein

Ex Officio Members

Rick Hartson, Upper Skagit Indian Tribe
Greg Hood, Swinomish Tribe/Skagit River System
Cooperative
Laurel Jennings, NOAA
Janet Curran, NOAA
Jenna Friebel, Skagit Drainage and Irrigation
Districts Consortium

Members Not in Attendance

Advisory Group Members

Darrell Tawes

Ex Officio Members

Laura Boerner, Army Corps of Engineers
Rich Carlson, USFWS
Dana Dysart, Army Corps of Engineers
Erin Murray, PSP
Mike See, Skagit County
Scott Schuyler, Upper Skagit Tribe
Karina Siliverstova, Skagit County

WDFW Staff

Jenny Baker
Seth Ballhorn
Brendan Brokes
Loren Brokaw
Edward Eleazer
Belinda Rotton
Chuck Stambaugh
Bob Warinner
Fenner Yarborough

Facilitators

Elizabeth McManus
Andy Chinn

Selected Management Alternative for Island Unit

Jenny Baker from WDFW reviewed full site restoration as the selected management alternative for Island Unit. Jenny reviewed background on Island Unit, scope of the alternatives analysis, and the criteria by which the alternatives were assessed. Jenny then detailed the selected alternative of full site restoration, rationale for selection, and acknowledged the trade-offs associated with selecting the alternative.

Brendan Brokes from WDFW reiterated his appreciation for Advisory Group members taking the time to discuss the selected alternative during a series of phone conversations with WDFW staff following the decision. Brendan acknowledged that the decision is not the preferred option for many, and that full restoration of the Island Unit represents a significant loss for those that use it in its current configuration.

Advisory Group Discussion

Following the presentation on the selected management alternative, Advisory Group members provided their thoughts, feelings and opinions. A summary is provided below:

- Despite significant input from waterfowlers, some felt that WDFW did not provide an opportunity for questions and answers and many waterfowlers feel their questions were not addressed.
- WDFW did not have any easy decision and it will be important to have a conversation about how to incorporate waterfowl conservation and hunting as part of multi-benefit planning.
- Waterfowlers have steadily lost opportunities over the years and feel it has happened without any associated salmon recovery to show for it.
- WDFW's description of permitting challenges as a rationale for not pursuing partial or no restoration is frustrating.
- Tribes have experienced diminished fishing opportunities over the years due to declines in salmon.
- Restoring fish habitat is important and, along with the decision to pursue full restoration at Island Unit, it is important to open a conversation amongst all stakeholders about how to make up for the loss of hunting opportunity that this represents for the waterfowling community.
- Some felt like WDFW had already made its decision on a preferred alternative at the outset of the project; others felt it was a fair and transparent process without a predetermined outcome.
- This project is vital for Skagit basin habitat recovery and aligns with the Skagit Delta Tidegates and Fish Initiative. It also is the right thing to do for salmon, Orca, and tribes.
- Island Unit lands are public lands that should be restored first.
- The frustration and disappointment from waterfowl hunters is understandable and their ideas for how to work together on solutions will be important.
- Waterfowlers are frustrated that despite their concerns and questions they were unable to change the outcome. Many waterfowl hunters and other individuals and groups have expressed interest in helping find solutions and hopefully these individuals and groups will continue to participate as planning at Island Unit continues.
- Waterfowl are particularly abundant in the Skagit Delta currently; however salmon numbers continue to decline, and restoring salmon runs requires as much human support as possible.

Brendan wrapped up the discussion by describing WDFW's near-term plans related to the Skagit Wildlife Area. Brendan noted that WDFW struggles with staff time and resources; recognizing this, Region 4 plans to submit a request in the FY2022 supplemental budget to fund work on landscape opportunities to support multiple uses. WDFW staff will also meet internally during the next week or so to continue discussing how to incorporate waterfowl hunting opportunities on the landscape.

Maximizing Stakeholder Value at the Site Scale and Landscape Scale

Elizabeth facilitated an Advisory Group discussion of how to maximize stakeholder value at Island Unit and across the broader Skagit landscape, given the selected management alternative. During the discussion, the facilitation team recorded key ideas from Advisory Group members. These ideas are summarized below:

Site Scale Ideas:

- Emphasize the importance of cattail management once the site is restored
- If possible, consider dedicating a percentage (e.g., 1%) of restoration budget to hunting blinds and plant seeding, and/or seek alternative funding sources (e.g., hospitality tax towards conservation futures, conservation futures funds from land transactions)
- Use expert advice from the waterfowling community for design and siting of hunting blinds
- Use waterfowl and habitat staff at WDFW to inform design work (e.g., moving ditch spoils into piles where moist soils management could be done)
- Plant and reestablish native vegetation to benefit multiple species and uses (e.g., Lyngby's sedge, spike-rush, wapato, bur-reed, bulrush)
- Ensure WDFW resources are available for hunting blinds' maintenance, vegetation control, and other needs (not just relying on volunteer work)
- Identify features in the design phase such as channel headwater ponds that provide habitat for fish, waterfowl, aquatic plants (that serve as waterfowl food) as well as hydraulic support for tidal channels. Features that support access are also important (e.g., additional boat and kayak landings, large enough channels)

Landscape Scale Ideas:

- Upgrade the Headquarters boat launch to make it usable over a wider range of tides
- Organize a broad coalition of stakeholder support for supplemental budget requests to help legislators support WDFW
- Consider how to replace the type of hunting opportunities that will be unavailable at Island Unit after restoration
- Work with the agricultural community to look at ways to improve cover cropping to benefit water quality, cropland, and birds
- Improve hunting opportunities to ensure hunters don't have to knock on doors to gain access
- Optimize other WDFW lands (e.g., Headquarters, Leque, Milltown) for hunting
- Look into other WDFW lands in the Skagit Delta for waterfowling (e.g., Samish River/saltwater location currently set up for birding)
- Consider private land restoration and how that can meet the needs of fish, flood, agriculture, and waterfowl
- Emphasize the importance of shifting the perception to look beyond the price per acre of land (Skagit land is expensive) when considering how to use limited resources and instead look at public benefits (e.g., proximity to population centers will get much more use)

- Develop an integrated plan for the Skagit ecosystem, using examples from other parts of the state (e.g., Yakima System, Chehalis Basin)
- Partner with Skagit County, building on mutual interest in tourist and hunter visits

Several Advisory Group members also indicated their interest in continuing their involvement in Island Unit and wider Skagit planning. WDFW thanked Advisory Group members for their input and noted that the Agency is looking broadly at opportunities to improve hunting in Whatcom and Snohomish Counties in addition to Skagit County.

Next Steps

- WDFW will meet internally to discuss next steps related to additional hunting opportunities and how to involve Advisory Group members who are interested in continuing to provide input on planning at Island Unit and in the Skagit Delta.
- WDFW will also consider groups and individuals that did not participate in the Advisory Group process and how to involve them in future planning efforts.