

ISLAND UNIT ADVISORY GROUP

Meeting Summary

Monday February 3rd, 2019 • 9:00 am to 4:40 pm

Skagit Station
105 E Kincaid St
Mt Vernon, WA 98273

Participants

Advisory Group Members

Rick Billieu
Richard Brocksmith
Reb Broker
Bob Cooper
James Ono
Jeff Osmundson
Amber Parmenter
Brandon Roozen
John Stein
Darrell Tawes

Ex Officio Members

Janet Curran, NOAA
Greg Hood, Skagit River System Coop
Karina Siliverstova, Skagit County
Jenna Friebel, Skagit Drainage and Irrigation
Districts Consortium
Rick Hartson, Upper Skagit Indian Tribe

WDFW Project Team Staff

Jenny Baker
Seth Ballhorn
Loren Brokaw
Belinda Rotton
Bob Warinner

Presenters

Eric Beamer, Skagit River System Coop
Aaron Dufault, WDFW
Andrew Fowler, WDFW
Casey Ruff, Skagit River System Coop
Bob McClure, Upper Skagit Indian Tribe
Kyle Spragens, WDFW
Ruth Milner, WDFW
Rob Wingard, WDFW

Facilitators

Elizabeth McManus
Andy Chinn

Members Not in Attendance

Advisory Group Members

Roger Goodan
Jed Holmes

Ex Officio Members

Laura Boerner, Army Corps of Engineers
Rich Carlson, USFWS
Dana Dysart, Army Corps of Engineers
Laurel Jennings, NOAA

Erin Murray, PSP
Mike See, Skagit County
Scott Schuyler, Upper Skagit Indian
Tribe

Review of Draft Management Alternatives

Jenny Baker from WDFW briefly reviewed the draft Island Unit management alternatives that were introduced at the first meeting, and asked for final input. Following the presentation, meeting participants engaged in a discussion that included topics such as the feasibility of moving the barge landing, using cost information to compare alternatives, past restoration at this site and changes in considerations since that time.

Introduction to Criteria

Jenny introduced the draft criteria that will be used to compare management alternatives and described how those relate to today's presentations. She also introduced two additional topics as background for the day: 1) the Endangered Species Act and 2) habitats and ecosystem functions provided by estuaries.

In-Depth Presentations and Discussion

Advisory Group members received a series of presentations on key topics of interest. After each presentation Advisory Group members engaged in a facilitated discussion about each topic.

Chinook and Estuaries

Eric Beamer, Skagit River System Cooperative

Eric's presentation included the amount of estuary lost in the Skagit Delta over time, implications of this loss for Skagit Chinook salmon recovery, why the Skagit needs space in the estuary for 1.35 million more smolts, how Skagit estuary restoration is working, and why more estuary restoration is needed. Discussion was brief and revolved around the data being from field studies and reflecting only wild "natural origin" fish.

Chinook Harvest Policy and Management

Aaron Dufault, WDFW (lead presenter)

Andrew Fowler, WDFW

Casey Ruff, Skagit River System Cooperative

Bob McClure, Upper Skagit Indian Tribe

Aaron's presentation covered the salmon harvest management framework (including the North of Falcon process), data collection and sharing, Puget Sound Chinook and Skagit Chinook information, and anticipated climate change impacts. Discussion centered on the relationship between Skagit stocks and Puget Sound-wide fishing opportunities, as well as potential effects of the "blob."

Waterfowl Conservation

Kyle Spragens, WDFW (lead presenter)

Ruth Milner, WDFW

Kyle's presentation included a review of North American waterfowl (ducks, geese, and swans), and then focused on dabbling ducks: the role of wetlands in their lifecycles and migrations, management drivers, survey efforts, the effect of past restoration on waterfowl, and what we know and don't know about the value of the Island Unit and Skagit estuary for waterfowl. Discussion included effects of past restoration on waterfowl behavior, the historic use of estuaries by waterfowl, and the potential impacts of changing management at the Island Unit when considering habitats and food resources on the greater landscape.

Waterfowl Program Habitats and Hunting Access

Belinda Rotten, WDFW

Rob Wingard, WDFW

Loren Brokaw, WDFW

Belinda, Rob and Loren reviewed WDFW's mandates, WDFW-owned and -managed lands in the Skagit area, habitat types and management, the Private Lands Access Program (PLAP), acreages of various habitats over time, efforts to follow through on replacement lands, and projects to improve access. Discussion topics included funding, participation in and enforcement associated with PLAP, and how farming practices and availability of farmland plays a role in landscape-scale waterfowl habitats.

Note: During the lunch break WDFW's Region 4 Director, Brendan Brokes, thanked the Advisory Group for their participation in the process.

Linkages between Agriculture and Salmon Recovery Efforts in the Skagit Delta

Janet Curran, NOAA NMFS

Jenna Friebel, Skagit County Drainage and Irrigation Districts Consortium

Janet and Jenna discussed the importance of agriculture in the Skagit Delta, and the regulatory, legal and political frameworks guiding agriculture and salmon recovery. They described House Bill 1418, the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan, the Skagit Tidegate and Fish Initiative (TFI), and the Skagit Hydrodynamic Modeling (HDM) project. Discussion centered on the generation and use of TFI credits at Island Unit, and the importance of TFI as a tool to balance salmon habitat restoration and agricultural interests. The group also discussed funding, methods and efficacy of cattail management.

Infrastructure Condition and Management

Belinda Rotten, WDFW

Jenny Baker, WDFW

Belinda and Jenny described the function and current condition of the tidegates and dikes on the Island Unit, efforts to replace the Barn Field tidegate, maintenance and repair of the dikes, and the future challenges associated with operations and maintenance when considering anticipated climate change effects. The group did not have questions or comments so there was no discussion following this presentation.

Advisory Group Discussion

Advisory Group members then reflected on all of the preceding presentations. Discussion topics included:

- The importance of understanding the costs of the different management alternatives, and how wildlife other than waterfowl and salmon could be affected by restoration.
- The uncertainty felt by some members of the group about whether restoration would be successful in recovering salmon when so many other actions affect salmon as well.
- The evidence presented that estuary restoration is putting us on the right track for salmon recovery and progress has been made on other pieces of the puzzle such as harvest and hatcheries.
- The effect that each alternative would have on the number of hunting blinds on the Island Unit.

Advisory Group members shared their key takeaways from the meeting:

- Island Unit is a unique, special place for waterfowl hunters.
- Many things have to happen for salmon recovery, but we know that Skagit estuary restoration is one of those things – and we know it works.
- Tribes are keenly interested in salmon recovery because of their treaty rights, historic and cultural connection to fishing, and desire to pass their fishing traditions to future generations.
- Although this group is looking specifically at Island Unit, it's important to keep in mind the broader context of what is happening in the Skagit Delta.
- The Advisory Group should think creatively about how to jointly develop outside-the-box solutions.
- Thinking 20 years into the future, we would like to be able say: We still have farmland, we still have salmon, and we still have places to hunt. These are good goals to reach for and solutions will be more powerful if different interests can come together to develop them and advocate for them.

Next Steps

- Ross Strategic will circulate a link to presentations from this meeting
- Advisory Group members will consider the criteria presented by WDFW and be prepared to provide feedback on them at the March 16 meeting. The March 16 meeting will also be a time to begin talking about how to maximize all stakeholder values for each of the alternatives.
- Ross Strategic will work on scheduling the subsequent meeting (approximate timeframe of July)