

ISLAND UNIT ADVISORY GROUP

Meeting Summary

Wednesday November 4th, 2020 • 1:00 to 3:00 pm

Virtual Meeting

Participants

Advisory Group Stakeholder Members

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

WDFW Staff

Jenny Baker
Seth Ballhorn
Loren Brokaw
Belinda Rotton
Bob Warinner

Facilitators

Elizabeth McManus
Andy Chinn

Advisory Group Ex Officio Members

Janet Curran, NOAA
Greg Hood, Skagit River System Cooperative
Karina Siliverstova, Skagit County Public Works
Jenna Friebel, Skagit Drainage and Irrigation
Districts Consortium
Laurel Jennings, NOAA
Scott Schuyler, Upper Skagit Tribe

Other Participants

Tino Villaluz, Swinomish Tribe

Applying the Criteria: Questions and Observations from Advisory Group

The Advisory Group followed up on WDFW's [presentation](#) during the 10/26 meeting with a more detailed discussion of WDFW's application of the criteria (answers to questions shown in italics):

- How will sea level rise affect Island Unit and how is that incorporated in the criteria?
 - *There is a high degree of certainty that sea level rise will occur, and for planning purposes WDFW uses the mid-point of the range developed by Army Corps of Engineers. This input is included in Fir Island Farm project and Wiley Slough project.*
- Why are tidegate repairs included in the Alternative 1 cost estimate?
 - *The condition of the tidegates and attempt to replace the Barnfield tidegate are described in the technical memos. WDFW assumes that the one or both tidegates will fail at some point, which would make current management impossible. One of the main*

reasons WDFW is undertaking the alternatives analysis now is because of the need to address the failing tidegates.

- In Alternative 1, is funding for continued production of forage also uncertain or does it have a dedicated funding source?
 - *There is no dedicated funding source for Island Unit operations and maintenance costs. Funding for enhanced waterfowl forage has traditionally come from non-Pittman Robertson funding.*
- Steelhead should be included in the fish conservation criteria.
 - *Steelhead are included in WDFW's food fish and game fish criteria on pages 7, 8, and 21 in the criteria analysis document.*
- Is there uncertainty in rec fishing benefits? do we know full restoration would result in returns that represent "significant benefits"?
 - *WDFW does not have direct quantitative data behind the significant benefits to recreational fishing. There is Puget Sound fishing and Skagit River-specific fishing. The Skagit River system produces over half of the wild Chinook that return to Puget Sound. If adult Chinook returns go up even slightly then there is a good chance of opening a Chinook sport fishery in the Skagit River, and any increase in available estuary habitat will help make that happen.*
- What data do we have that shows shorebirds don't use farmland or use it less than estuaries?
 - *WDFW does not have waterfowl or shorebird data from Island Unit for various reasons. WDFW subject matter experts provided the information in the technical memo based on best professional judgement.*
- A statement was made on 10/26 that full restoration would have no impact on the GSD waterfowl population. Doesn't the flight data from 2011 and 2013, when forage was not being produced on the Island Unit, contradict this?
 - *The statement was that there is no anticipated impact on waterfowl populations at the landscape scale but full restoration would result in some uncertainty in food resources due to reliance on lands outside of WDFW control. More information is available in the waterfowl and shorebird technical memo.*
- Western Washington Agricultural Association is willing to engage in a conversation about hunting opportunities on private lands.
- How well is the private lands program working?
 - *WDFW supports convening a conversation between WWAA and waterfowl hunters about how to provide additional and/or more value-added waterfowl hunting opportunities in the Skagit Delta.*
- What is the status of replacement lands?
 - *WDFW uses a variety of tools to provide waterfowl hunting and forage opportunities including (but not limited to) managing lands owned by WDFW and through agreements on privately owned lands. Acquiring additional land for waterfowl management is a tool WDFW continues to seek to use, however it requires a landowner with compatible land who is willing to sell and funding to purchase lands. There are also concerns from the agricultural community about farmland being taken out of commercial production.*
- Are the 3 factors included in the climate resilience category confounding? And should they be broken into 3 criteria?
 - *The ratings are not confounded by the three elements; the elements provide justification for similar ratings per alternative.*
- How will WDFW proceed with its decision around a preferred alternative?

- *WDFW will consider a variety of issues and continues to acknowledge the tradeoffs inherent in whatever decision is made. The Advisory Group was convened to learn about these issues and provide input to WDFW on topics such as the criteria by which WDFW looked at the alternatives, as well as application of that criteria. WDFW will take all this feedback into account, including public and tribal input, as it moves forward with a preferred alternative. WDFW will not weight the criteria or sum the ratings for each alternative.*

WDFW provided the following summary of the remainder of the project schedule:

- WDFW will issue its alternatives analysis report on November 16.
- WDFW will host a virtual open house on December 2 from 6 to 8 pm.
- WDFW will meet with tribes in early December.
- WDFW's Island Unit project team will submit its recommended preferred alternative to the Regional Management Team (RMT) in January.
- In mid-to late January WDFW will select a preferred alternative and publish the final alternatives analysis report.
- The Advisory Group will convene following the announcement of the preferred alternative to brainstorm how to maximize the outcomes for all interests within the preferred alternative.

Additional Questions and Observations from Advisory Group

Advisory Group members asked additional questions and provided the following comments (answers to questions shown in italics):

- Leque Island was a \$15 million project and there was no barging activity or anything else...and at farmed Island there is way more that would have to happen. Logistically it's much harder than any other project – so it's hard to believe it's at or below cost of any other project WDFW has done. We're setting ourselves up for failure if we say it ends up costing a nickel when it ends up costing a dollar.
 - *The cost estimate for Leque Island changed over time; the total construction cost ended up being \$6.5 million. For Island Unit construction cost estimates WDFW aimed for a conservative estimate, knowing this is preliminary and logistics are more challenging.*
- Why is there both levee construction and repair costs for Alternative 1?
 - *Levee repair is addressing the erosion areas. The north side of the west island has experienced a lot of erosion so rip rap and other reinforcement are required to repair it. Levee construction is adding height to the remaining dikes to account for sea level rise.*
- What was the projected cost to repair the tidegates 5 years ago?
 - *The preliminary estimate was around \$350,000 but this did not include mitigation.*
- Why is there a loss of estuary mitigation cost for Alternative 1?
 - *The cost is associated with tidegate replacement; if the tidegates are replaced then Chinook habitat continues to be isolated from tidal influence, and this will have to be mitigated.*
- How was the likelihood of implementation funding determined?
 - *This was a judgement call by WDFW staff who are familiar with grant programs and obtaining funding for previous similar projects.*
- How much has O&M funding for Island Unit fallen short over the last 10 years? Traditionally the majority of farmed island activities were paid for through the Snow Goose reserve.

- *Funding generated at the Snow Goose reserve is not obligated to Island Unit. Funding for Island Unit has been covered through base-level funding. Recurring costs are identified and most staff support is from non-Pittman Roberts funds. However, funding is never certain and shifts between funding biennium.*
- Since funding is a known quantity, why isn't it added to the budget so it's more certain?
 - *The Skagit Wildlife Area budget is part of the regional budget. WDFW has also been going through a budget-cutting exercise during the last several months so this is forefront within the Agency.*
- What is the probability of dike failure if the dike is not raised? What is the status of the analysis of sea level rise and dike height?
 - *WDFW has not completed a probability analysis. There are already places that experience occasional overtopping. With sea level rise, these impacts are expected to worsen if the dike is not raised.*
- If more agricultural lands are opened for hunting and enhanced forage, how would that be funded?
 - *One of the goals of the Private Lands Access Program is to secure more dedicated funding so if more land becomes available the program can take advantage of it. But funding only comes around every few years, which makes it difficult.*
- Out of 107 hunting days, the commenter hunts the Island Unit 90 days. The Island Unit is hunted by multiple users and is a unique waterfowl hunting area in the entire West coast. What is WDFW prepared to do, if Island Unit is restored to estuary?
 - *Regardless of which alternative is selected as the preferred alternative at Island Unit, WDFW is interested in exploring options such as working with Skagit agricultural interests to accelerate discussions around access to other lands in the Skagit Delta.*

Roundtable Discussion and Comments from Stakeholders

Each Advisory Group member was asked for any additional comments or questions (answers to questions shown in italics):

- Where do mitigation payments go?
 - *Mitigation assumes that WDFW would need to provide estuary habitat somewhere in the Skagit Delta. That can be done through a mitigation bank or at another site that WDFW restores. However, mitigation is not a cost covered by salmon habitat and ecosystem restoration funding sources.*
- Under Alternative 1, even if the dike is raised and the tidegate replaced, estuary habitat is not being taken out of use. But in any of the other scenarios, part or all of Island Unit is restored and mitigation funds are required. It seems more logical that, for example, under Alternative 4 there would be \$1.5 million paid into the Skagit Wildlife Area for mitigation because it is creating estuary habitat.
 - *Mitigation is required because Alternative 1 requires repairing the dikes and tidegates; in other words, it is not "no action" – it requires certain things to happen, and mitigation for those actions. Alternatives 2 and 3 also continue to isolate areas from tidal and riverine influence and so we assumed they would require mitigation as well. As far as alternative 4 resulting in funds being "generated," that is not how mitigation works. Mitigation is replacing or restoring functions and habitats to mitigate an action that has a negative impact to habitats and functions. Mitigation cost estimates are the cost to either buy credits in a mitigation bank or restore estuary. Restoration that is paid for by*

salmon and ecosystem restoration funding sources cannot be used as mitigation for other impacts. There is additional detail in the cost tables around mitigation.

- There are funding programs for restoration and the Island Unit would easily qualify. Funding for mitigation, however, is prohibited under most of these sources.
- Why were tribal treaty rights removed from the discussion?
 - *Tribal treaty rights were removed as a criteria category but are still an important factor for WDFW to consider and will be part of the decision-making process.*
- The food and game fish criteria should show significant benefits (+ +) under Alternative 4.
- WDFW have done a thorough job in developing the criteria. Clearly there is frustration from the hunting community and the need for solutions, which will likely be developed outside of this process.
- This advisory group should support further dialogue with the hunting community on how to meet their needs if a restoration alternative is selected.
- The high cost of restoration and the uncertain projected benefits are frustrating.
- Steelhead are the state fish and are currently at 5% of historic levels in Puget Sound. Orcas rely on salmon for survival and WDFW has done an outstanding job prioritizing fish populations.

Comments from Ex Officio Members

- Reiterating the importance of full restoration at Island Unit for salmon recovery in the Skagit basin and for Southern Resident Killer Whales. Island Unit has been looked at for habitat restoration since 2005 under the Chinook Recovery Plan, under TFI, and also in the Hydrodynamic Model for flood concerns.
- Tribes are advocates of full restoration but also recognize hunters' concerns; tribal members are also hunters.
- Tribes believe that if salmon win, everyone wins.
- For the groups that feel like they are experiencing a loss, just to note that it has been hard for everyone. Tribes have offered to advocate on behalf of the community for more support to the waterfowl hunting community but remain strong on the salmon side and would like to see full restoration.

Next Steps

- Advisory Group members should contact Jenny, Seth, Elizabeth, or Andy with any questions about the public comment period, or other information requests.
- After the announcement of a preferred alternative, the Advisory Group will reconvene around February 2021 to discuss how to maximize benefits for all users.