

Methow Wildlife Area Advisory Committee Meeting

Draft Meeting Notes

June 4, 2024

Winthrop Community Library, Winthrop

Attendees

WAAC Members

- James DeSalvo – Methow Valley Trails Collaborative
- Elaine Quinlan, Darla Dolph – Okanogan County Noxious Weed Control Board
- Terry Karro – Citizen/Great Old Broads for Wilderness
- Jasmine Minbashian – Methow Valley Citizens Council
- Cindi Confer Morris – Washington State Parks
- John Rohrer– Citizen, USFS retired
- Craig Boesel, Permittee
- Aaron Wold – Okanogan Conservation District

WDFW

- Justin Haug, North Central Wildlife Program Manager
- Brandon Troyer, North Central Assistant Program Manager
- Alex Repp, Assistant Wildlife Area Manager
- Lauri Vigue, Project Manager
- Nicole Jordan, CAPE
- Holly Barrick, Cultural Resources
- Heide Andersen, Recreation Planner

Welcome and Introductions

Planning Update – Lauri

The first draft of the wildlife area management plan is expected for internal review this fall. WDFW GIS staff have created the Methow Habitat Mapping spatial tool which

combines habitat and species spatial information (e.g., Priority Habitat and Species, connectivity information, etc.). The tool will be used to inform decision-making process for recreation planning. We will present a demo at the next WAAC meeting.

The next WAAC meeting is expected to take place this fall, along with a public workshop, pending completion of the cultural resources review of trails on the wildlife area.

The WAAC will have the opportunity to review the draft plan prior to SEPA, expected by 2025.

Wildlife Area Update

Wildlife area manager vacancy – Initial interviews occurred in May. We should know soon about the outcome or may consider opening recruitment a second time.

Shrubsteppe restoration – On the Golden Doe Unit, with funding provided by the Recreation Conservation Office, weeds are being treated with prescribed fire (65 acres – old ag field). The project has been successful. A fall planting will occur next year using a drill to seed with native grasses, and follow-up with native plantings.

Golden Doe Unit public access, currently there is no public access. The plan is to provide an additional parking area in one of the recently acquired parcels near the Golden Doe Ranch. We have easements with U.S. Forest Service and utilities.

Sandhill cranes – over the past two years the site has produced three colts. We have had ongoing trespass issues, even despite signage with hikers, runners and unleashed dogs.

Forest health – Current prescribed fire projects include Golden Doe Unit and Little Cub Creek (Rendezvous Unit). There has been lots of feedback from the community on the Little Cub Creek project. Comments are from a limited number of property owners that recreate in that area. The Little Cub Creek project went through SEPA. In 2013 there was a forest health assessment, conducted by The Nature Conservancy and Fire Network. Recommendations included thinning overstocked forests in a manner that resembles pre-fire suppression policy. historic plot structures showed this area was predominantly pine with approximately 13-23 trees per acres. Current prescriptions range from 20-40 trees per acre. On the Sinlahekin Wildlife Area, fire was controlled in treatment units of 20-40 trees per acre.

WAAC Question: What specifically are you hearing about the project that is raising issues?

Most folks are supportive. Typical comments include the presence of equipment and trucks, and dust. Mainly non-specific, there seems to be an issue of lost recreational use opportunity for a handful of the public. This is a high use area. Under standard practice the road would be impassible. In the near future, prescribed fire will occur on this project too. This is a prime area to use virtual fences.

WAAC Question: Is there a timing conflict with fawning?

Our goal is to have healthy forests in the wildlife area and fire risk is a huge concern.

The best time to log is in the spring, as fall and winter create challenging conditions (soil conditions) for logging. Our forestry team are the experts. Challenges include lack of mills – cannot send logs west due to pass closures. Not many logging operators do low impact logging. The work windows are very small.

TASK: Develop a list of mule deer fawning timing talking points. Include information about the percentage of survival should be general information about increasing habitat value for multiple species. Bear Creek is a great example of a successful prescribed fire treatment. Public access is limited. On the L. T. Murray Wildlife Area, immediately after a forest treatment the deer were using the lichen and mistletoe. Overall WDFW can be more proactive in our messaging. We will add FAQ on the website.

Illegal road and trail use – recently ATVs ran amok through the Methow Unit of the wildlife area, from the private resort at Pearygin Lake, they went off road into the Sullivan Ponds and Bear Ck Rd area. This is a huge concern with cultural resources. Previous shrubsteppe restoration planting sites were impacted. They did not locate the violators. Overall, there was not much habitat damage.

Okanogan County is working on a process to potentially allow WATVS to drive on specific county roads throughout various locations in the Methow Valley, including Lester Road. The USFS and the Trails Collaborative and other partners are working together to help support this conversation. The county proposal ties into U. S. Forest Service management, the USFS supports an advisory group process to gather and make recommendations. The Conconully State Park is open to ATVs and UTVs, and it's a different place, with disturbance, and noise. The surrounding roads are open by state law that we must abide by. This would draw in a new user groups, significant investment in Lester Road infrastructure would need to occur. All impacts need to be considered in this proposal. The laws are not being enforced.

Seasonal closure update

The seasonal closure was considered a success. A highlight is the fact Lewis Butte had about 70 deer present all winter. The next step includes collecting data during a deeper snow winter And compare it to the mild winter. There were a few violators mainly on the Big Buck Unit. Compliance was generally good except for a few individuals. Most of the public respected the closure. The focus on enforcement was on education not citation.

Recreation Subcommittee

To receive additional focused WAAC support for the development of the recreation plan, a Recreation Subcommittee will be formed. The main requirements will be attending additional meetings as the recreation and travel management plans are developed. To ease travel, some of the meetings will be in Teams. If needed, we recruit outside the WAAC too for additional members representing important perspectives or interests that are not already on the WAAC.

WAAC members who voiced interest in the subcommittee include: James, Terry, John, Jasmine – Madelin as an alternative. **TASK: WDFW will send a follow-up email to the entire WAAC to solicit further interest.**

Travel Management - Heide

The goal of this process is to develop a sustainable multimodal travel management program for WDFW. A sustainable system would be one that protects natural, tribal and cultural resources; and provides safe and desirable experience for visitors. The focus of travel management on the Methow Wildlife Area is completing a route inventory, determining the designated routes that will be managed and signed, rulemaking, and finally monitoring and maintenance schedules for routes.

For the trail inventory, we had an intern from Western Washington University fine tune our survey tool and inventory all routes on the wildlife area. A consultant is doing inventories and conditions assessments on six wildlife areas this summer. Once we have the route inventory completed, we will start reviewing the data and making decisions. The plan is to have a robust monitoring and maintenance plan in place eventually.

For the route inventory, we begin by using the agency's existing data, and add in open source data (e.g., STRAVA and Onyx). Field verification ground truths and collects basic attributes.

The travel management process will delineate areas to be covered, collect additional relevant data regarding resources and visitor use and determine primary management objectives.

The assessment of conditions will look at the trail sustainability, e.g., soils, erosion, slopes, etc., and develop proposed solutions. The TREAD contractor did evaluations of sustainability including characterization of trails, and mapped re-routes. A trails condition assessment is being done this summer for Lewis Butte and Rizeor Lake, and several trails in the Pipestone area.

Travel management plan will be an appendix to the final Methow Wildlife Area Management Plan.

Rule Making Status -

WAC 220-500-041 – the “illegal routes rule”, has experienced ongoing review from the attorney general's office (language below). Comments were received from the tribes. SEPA will be the next step. Penalty language – tribes thought violation of this rule should be a criminal defense.

WAC 220-500-041 Construction, creation and maintenance of roads, trails, and structures. (1) A person must obtain the express written permission of the department in order to construct, create, modify, repair, relocate, or maintain new or existing road, trail, sign, structure, or other facility or improvement. A copy of the written permission must be kept on sight during any work.

(2) Violating this section is a misdemeanor pursuant to RCW 77.15.230.

(3) This section does not apply to erecting and using temporary camp and blind structures pursuant to WAC 220-