

South Puget Sound Wildlife Area Advisory Committee Meeting

Final Meeting Notes

June 29, 2021

Teams Call

Attendees

WAAC Members

- Alan Billingsley – Neighbor - Lakewood
- Mary Dodsworth, City of Lakewood
- Herb Gerhardt – Citizen, Mason County
- Mendy Harlow – Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group
- Daniel Hull – Nisqually Reach Nature Center
- Glynnis Nakai – USFWS Nisqually Billy Frank Jr National Wildlife Refuge
- Natasha Holt – Department of Corrections
- John Riegsecker – Citizen, bird watcher
- Elizabeth Rodrick – Black Hills Audubon
- Dana Rosenbach – North Mason School District
- Kurt Snyder – Washington Waterfowl Association

Other: Vania Beard - DOC

WDFW

- Brian Calkins, Wildlife Regional Program Manager
- Darric Lowery, Wildlife Area Manager - Scatter Creek, South Sound and North Olympic wildlife areas
- Lauri Vigue, Project Manager
- Joel Sisolak, Planning, Recreation, and Outreach Section Manager

Welcome & Introductions – Brian

Brian welcomed everyone to the meeting. The purpose of this meeting is to collect comments on the draft South Puget Sound Wildlife Area Management Plan. Darric will also provide a wildlife area update. Brian acknowledged everyone's patience in this process. When the SPS plan process started, we were doing the Scatter Creek Plan at the same time, this ended up being too much work and we ended up focusing on finalizing the Scatter Creek Plan, which was approved by the director in December.

Planning overview – Lauri

The last time we met was in April 2020, and we discussed the draft goals and objectives. The plans are consistent with the WDFW mission statement “to preserve, protect and perpetuate fish, wildlife and ecosystems while providing sustainable fish and wildlife recreational and commercial opportunities” and the 25-year Strategic Plan. This is a 10-year management plan, during the planning process public and stakeholder input was considered, values are integrated values from the fish, habitat and wildlife programs. The role of the advisory committee is to provide public and other stakeholders’ perspectives in WDFW wildlife area planning and management activities.

South Puget Sound Wildlife Area Update – Darric

For the most part members of the WAAC will provide the specific wildlife area highlights – the topics are based on issues that were raised by the WAAC and the public at the onset of this process.

SPS Unit Lakewood – (Darric) The Rotary adopted the South Puget Sound Unit leading the charge of cleaning up the unit. The unit has had wetland restoration, clean up necropsy lab, including funding for replacing fencing around the western pond turtle enclosure.

(Alan) In the 1960s the area had an interpretative center that serves a major metropolitan area. Busloads of kids regularly visited the unit. The Rotary adopted the unit and organizes volunteer events including volunteers from the youth corps. Key achievements have included installation of a new fence, weed control, improvements to the ADA trail. Through this volunteerism, the local community has taken pride and ownership in the unit which in the long run benefits the wildlife area.

Union River Unit – (Kurt) Union River Blind Project - received private business and non-profit donations for replacing two floating blinds. Phase 2 will involve rebuilding two stick blinds and may include some trail work. Washington Waterfowl Association was the biggest donor.

The transfer of Theiler lands is still in process – delayed due to Real Estate Services capacity issues.

(Mendy) – The Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group’s Union River cleanup project – included volunteers from the rotary and the Kiwanis Club. They removed wood debris from the estuary from old docks (treated wood and Styrofoam) – over 20 volunteers contributed.

Off leash dog area has been designated on HCSEG preserve. This will help reduce impacts to important birding areas. They also are in the process of developing a 1 ½ mile trail - open to leashed dogs only.

HCSEG has received North American Wetlands Conservation Act funding for additional acquisitions in the area adjacent to Union River Unit.

McNeil Island –

(Darric) WDFW continues to coordinate with DSHS and DOC – conversations with conservation and restoration activities. Horned streaked lark surveys are occurring on the island with potential for reintroduction.

No recreation allowed.

Nisqually Unit – (Daniel)

The water access site improvement project kicks off in August. The Nature Reach Center has currently 150 volunteers involved with community monitoring, and education.

Pre-Covid, we typically reach 4-5,000 students per year. Access it the center of this unit – Luhr Beach. Ongoing work includes the Aquatic Reserve extension, currently proposed to extend around McNeil Island, working with conservation organizations, DNR and WDFW on restoration projects on McNeil Island. Desires improving and providing more walk-in visitations and equity and inclusion access, making the connection with resources.

Big Beef / Morgan Marsh – During the development of this plan, one objective was completed, 266 acres of forest habitat pre-commercial thinning.

Overview of draft plan – Darric

Top 10 goals/objectives –

1B – Weed management – the units with significant challenges are recognized, with measures included to reduce the invasive plants.

2A/B – Forest management – McNeil Island and Lake Koeneman are the focus.

Noteworthy: Two new units were added to this plan – Lake Koeneman and Smith Access (Skokomish Unit)

3B – Oregon spotted frog monitoring.

5A. Reduce wildlife conflict on McNeil Island.

6. Salmon recovery restoration.

6D. Union River Estuary interconnectivity – Projects started in late 2000s to return to functioning estuary, with the goal to continue to Lynch Cove and potential project near Theiler Wetlands.

7A. Increase waterfowl hunting and reduce user conflicts.

7C. Increase wildlife viewing opportunities – with the focus on signage to get better compliance, and information to the public. What activities are suitable for the WLA? Applies to Nisqually, Union, South Puget Sound units.

7M. Reduce conflicts between pets and wildlife.

9B. Develop a design for the new urban wildlife center on the South Puget Sound Unit.

10. increase staff capacity to meet operational needs.

Comments/Discussion

- The South Puget Sound Unit is unique because of the presence of endangered species, and hatcheries. Within the next 10 years it will be developed into a premier education center for youth, while maintaining habitat for endangered species.
- The education center should also include a focus on adults in the community. There is more people that would like to learn about these places.
- The Nisqually Reach Nature Center is focusing on diversity and equity. How are we meeting this need in this plan?
- Impressed with the plan and the list of goals and objectives, lots of information.
- There was a request for field trips to some of the units, e.g. McNeil Island.
- What is the status of the western pond turtle pond at Goat Ranch? WDFW backed away from Goat Ranch ponds as a viable site for WPT, we stopped releasing about 8 years ago. The turtles are surviving but not reproducing. The upland sites require a particular condition and the eggs were not hatching.
- What is the status of the recreation strategy and how will it inform WLA planning? The Recreation Strategy is due to be completed in September 2021. In the future wildlife areas will each have a recreation plan. The Methow Wildlife Area will be a pilot plan.

McNeil Island

- Update the Aquatic Reserve map update with new DNR logo.
- The McNeil Unit would make a great wildlife preserve – a showcase unit. Has the USFWS looked into ownership? Acquisition funding is so limited and competitive, however the USFWS still continues to entertain that idea, and considers options.
- The Nisqually tribe has interest in the Island (co-management).
- Daniel is on the stakeholder committee for the Aquatic Reserve. The future of conservation is a big part of expansion area.
- A new well has been built on the island for future water needs. The Buttersworth Reservoir and pumps fate will need to be determined.

Nisqually

- The public is in favor of improved walk-in fishing access (7J). Fishing from shore is not good access.

- Prior to the Brown Farm Dike removal, there was fishing at McAllister Creek. Where the dike was removed is not conducive to fishing. If there is a push for a new pier the USFWS would support the structure. A hook into deeper water is more of an advantage. How do we get a project out there that supports public interest and conservation? An objective in the plan to have the discussions. It will take a lot of external interest to get it to happen. A focus of the USFWS for the next 5 years is an emphasis on recreation access – fishing and hunting – especially if we can bring in and educate the underserved population.
- The easement issue near McAllister Creek (7K) - Eagle Cliff development – it is a WDFW legal challenge. The easement is between two private houses and the landowners landscaped the easement. There are no trespassing signs there now. The path is still being used.
- This is public property; the right-of-way is owned by the state. Washington Waterfowl Association supports taking back the ROW. It could be used for wildlife viewing.

South Puget Sound Unit

- SPS Unit map – the triangle area east of the unit, next to Chambers Creek, who owns the area? It is private.
- Recognizing the small unit parcels on the landscape, it causes confusion to the public on regulations – adjoining public lands. Is there a proposal to collaborate regulations with other public agencies? The is an objective (3K) to collaborate with other governments to acquire lands in Kitsap county. One another objective (Big Beef Creek) to consider consolidating lands (11B).
- Consider connecting the South Puget Sound Unit to the Chambers Creek Trail System, only three blocks away. This is a study underway by the City of Lakewood, University Place and Pierce County. It would connect a trail system to Chambers Bay. Easements and signage would be needed.
- It is important to provide clear communication to the public that agencies are working together.
- WAAC members should share work party's information within this group to spread the word.
- There is interest within the Diversity Division on improving wildlife viewing at Nisqually, Union, and the South Puget Sound units.

Wrap-up

- The Draft South Puget Sound Wildlife Area Plan comments are due July 14th.
- The SEPA 30-day public review is expected to begin in August
- We are planning to have a virtual public meeting to kick off the public review process.

- The final plan is expected to be completed by early fall 2021.