

Wildlife Diversity Advisory Council

Meeting Notes – Gaydos' draft notes

Thursday, Feb 20, 2025: 1pm- 4pm

Attendees:

WDAC Members: Glen Mendel, Patric Gallagher, Matthew Danielson, Trina Bayard, Nancy Lee, Jeff Kozma, Jerry Joyce, Anne Van Sweringen, Sarina Jepsen, Denis DeSilva, Monika Weiland Shields, Kathleen Gobush, John Farnsworth, Joe Gaydos

WDFW Staff: Thomas Obrien, Janet Gorrell, Julia Smith, Jenna Judge, Jess Stocking, Brandon Austin

Meeting minutes: Glen moved to approve the WDAC's October meeting minutes, Jerry seconded it, and they were approved as edited.

After that, John moved to approve today's agenda and Nancy seconded. The draft Agenda was approved for use today.

Action Item review from October 2024 meeting:

1. Letter regarding the barred owl – John, Joe and Nancy drafted a letter from WDAC to the WDFW staff regarding feedback that we had for the staff to slightly improve their barred owl presentation they gave to us before delivering it to the Fish and Wildlife Commission.
2. Provide comments at the Commission meeting in Cle Ellum on the barred owl: Patrick attended the Cle Ellum Commission meeting and testified. John also attended the meeting and got feedback from the WDFW staff that having the WDAC there was beneficial. He said that WDFW Biodiversity staff also appreciated the comments we provided on their draft presentation to us. Jerry also testified virtually and quoted a position letter by Birds Connect Seattle and got feedback that his testimony was helpful. The comments were favorable for having the WDAC present and weighing in on this in person at the Commission Meeting. There was a general feeling that we as WDAC members should continue to provide this sort of input to the Fish and Wildlife Commission.

Side Bar Discussion: Julia Smith (WDFW) briefed us on the status of the Agency implementing barred owl control. They had some hesitation, but didn't explicitly say that WDFW cannot so they are moving forward but still have to determine how to fund this work. They have started a spotted owl population

augmentation/translocation working group with many different working groups and have had a few initial meetings. **TO DO:** John Farnsworth will provide Julia Smith with a personal contact at San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance that has done condor recovery like what WDFW might consider with spotted owls. WDFW is still waiting to hear if the US Fish and Wildlife Service will take on the barred owl reduction work (they may not have the funding and capacity). If they don't, WDFW will have to work with tribes and other partners to take this work on.

3. Review comments on WDFW's solar wind development – Patrick was unable to complete this action item. The renewable team is working on internal comments. It may have another round to request external comments, which will provide us with another opportunity to submit comments. The plan for WDAC is to wait until the next round of external comments, then provide our feedback. We will ask for WDFW staff to keep us apprised of when this goes out again for public comment.
4. Provide comments on the pygmy rabbit letter. Matthew discussed the comments he drafted regarding WDFW's review of pygmy rabbits. Briefly, WDAC members recommend that WDFW continue to list the pygmy rabbits as Endangered in Washington State. The Commission voted to maintain endangered status for this species.

Personalized license plate revenue

Jenna Judge updated the WDAC on WDFW's interest in increasing the cost of personalized license plates (PLPs). A handout was also provided in the meeting material. These funds have been an important source of funding for WDFW biodiversity work, which is still reliant on these funds. Prior to the biodiversity infusion of funds from the state, PLPs were a very flexible and important source of funds, including as a match for federal grants. The revenue from PLPs has not increased and WDFW asked the legislature to increase the renewal fee for PLPs to \$52

Sen. Cortez is proposing to amend a current transportation bill, SB 5444, that will amend a number of license plates and the accounts they fund. In this bill, Sen. Cortez also has picked up WDFW's request to increase the cost of PLPs from \$42 to \$52, an approximate 25% increase in revenue.

While WDFW staff did not lobby, WDAC members discussed how we as individuals might support this bill and potential increase in revenue for biodiversity work by submitting our comments:

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5444&Year=2025&Initiative=false>

Other Legislative Updates

Tom Obrien opened discussion on current legislative actions. Most of this time was spent discussing three current bills in Olympia seeking to restructure governance of the fish and wildlife commission (1685, 1930, 5728). These are a product of a historical tension of the power balance between the hunting and fishing aspect of the agency and the newer diversity, or conservation, view. There was discussion by WDAC membership about these various bills and how each of them would alter the current governance structure of WDFW. There was a feeling that most people did not expect to see these bills move forward, but that they would start a multi-year process to discuss this. Some people are waiting to see how Gov. Ferguson will handle the current WDFW governance structure before the legislature needs to act.

Questions came up on the following bills:

1311 – a statewide bill to downlist wolves;

1825 – a bill to repeal the existing RCW that limits WDFW's authority regarding grizzly bear management;

5203 – a wildlife connectivity bill that WDFW supports, which requires WDFW and WSDOT to develop and integrate a wildlife habitat connectivity strategy

Net Ecological Gain

Tom Obrien gave the WDAC a presentation on the State's efforts to establish a policy on Net Ecological Gain (NEG). The No-net-loss concept evolved from the State's Growth Management Act and Shoreline Management Act. There is a feeling that despite this we are still experiencing loss. The Legislature passed a proviso to examine if the state could implement a NEG strategy. The goal was to build policy support for this and to develop an implementation framework so the state could adopt a NEG policy. The final report to the legislature is due in June 2025.

Questions raised included:

- The relationship between the State's mitigation ratios and the NEG policy work. These are separate subjects that the State is working on simultaneously (with the caveat that if we get specific mitigation ratios correct, they could result in NEG).
- It is not clear how this would influence restoration or the current SWAP
- Are they using the WA State Academy of Sciences Report on NEG as a basis? It was definitely a driver that triggered this proviso.

Northwest Forest Plan:

NW Forest Plan Amendment—Brandon Austin

In 2023 the federal government formed Federal Advisory Comm (FAC). Included wide array of organizations.

Completed work in June 2024, developed recommendations. USFS developed Draft EIS (DEIS) Plan amendment.

Issues:

1. Incorporate indigenous knowledge and increase tribal inclusion
2. Forest stewardship
3. Fire resistance and resilience
4. Biological resources —species and habitat needs
5. Climate change—mostly a statement to consider
6. Air quality
7. Sustainability of regional communities

Amendment did not address Late-Successional Reserves (LSR), Aquatic Conservation Strategy, or Adaptive management frameworks. No change to Survey and Management.

Alternatives developed for Draft EIS:

Alt A —no action

Alt B-FAC recommendations

Alt C-emphasis natural processes, limited management

Alt D—emphasis fire resiliency, greater use of hazardous fuels reduction

Late-Successional Reserves management previously limited for forest stands < 80 yrs old, while it now allows management of forests 120-150 yrs, depending on habitat type.

Next steps:

WDFW is providing a comment letter—due March 17.

The Federal Advisory Council continues to meet.

Additional amendments or revisions possible.

OPB did Timber Wars historic perspective.

Conservation NW is excited to see some changes, especially differentiating between dry and moist forest stands (east vs west). Need more clarification though for folks on the ground. Also want to see more tribal inclusion in Alt D.

Discussion of WDFW Priorities and Strategies—Director Kelly Susewind

Legislative session

-NEG proviso

-Riparian roundtable

-Commission—bills on Commission structure and governance. Ruckleshaus report was impetus. Expect much discussion, uncertain major changes.

Commission —Gov Ferguson request removal of appointees appointed by Gov Inslee, not confirmed by senate leaving two current vacancies.

The new Governor is interviewing candidates, including the 2 appointed by Gov Inslee. Legislature initiated a proviso based on the Ruckleshaus report, which interviewed >100 individuals and asked about WDFW governance. There is concern about the re-appointment process and accountability. The Commission will convene a workshop and try to develop recommendations to legislature. WDFW is not weighing in.

Question: Interviews only for 2 open positions?

Answer: No, he believes it is for all 3 positions, including commissioner Anderson's whose term is expiring. Right now, the report is they are "interviewing for commissioners".

Budget

Fed \$\$ funds a lot of work. Be cautious about decisions until more complete info. Carrying on business as usual, proceeding cautiously.

Question: Does WDFW have any stop work orders or restricted in work with Canada?

Answer: No, not currently.

There is currently a \$12M budget shortfall in Washington State. WDFW Had \$100M in requests. Priorities are to continue work on safety for staff, biodiversity funding \$31M/biennium. Request to maintain the current level of funding, not requesting new money. Inslee requested a \$4m cut from WDFW and Ferguson asked for a 6% cut. Have \$47M ongoing, want to be able to keep.

Question: WDAC how can we help you more?

Answer: WDAC is one of most valuable advisory groups with a high level of expertise. Comm weighs input. Continue doing good work. Staff can help direct where to be most influential.

Open Discussion

Committee reports not included on this agenda. Will continue to have on future agendas.

Q. Opportunities to be more involved in NEG? And advising on revising mitigation ratios?

TO DO: Tom—will look into opportunity. Recall NEG was not to be public process but will check.

TO DO: Solar/Wind engagement tracking for re-engage.—Patrick

Q Commission agenda topic that we should be alerted to?

Not sure what is upcoming. Taylor may provide info on upcoming PSR.

Commission is a tricky space for us.

Need better marketing on how biodiversity helps support hunted species. Would like to see if as a full circle approach.

WDAC could think about expanding our impact.

We need to coalesce with other advisory groups, think about what we can do.

Wrap up, next steps, action items, and next meeting date

Next meeting: May/June in person.

Action Items:

1. Provide Julia Smith with a personal contact at San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance that has done condor recovery like what WDFW might consider with spotted owls. (John Farnsworth)
2. Investigate opportunity for NEG engagement. Recall NEG was not to be public process but will check (Tom)
3. Solar/Wind engagement tracking for re-engage. (Patrick)
4. Need Doodle poll for next meeting. (Patrick)
5. Sarina Jepsen will be our next note taker.