



Director's Report to the Commission

April 5-6, 2019

Policy and Public Engagement

Legislative Update

March Washington DC Trip

Director Susewind, Nate Pamplin, and Meagan West met with seven Washington House members, both Senators, and executive leadership at NMFS and USFWS headquarters. The purpose of the meetings was twofold - to introduce the Kelly as the new Director and to advocate for WDFW's FFY 2020 funding and policy priorities.

The trip followed the partial release of the President's FY 2020 budget, in which USFWS's budget was subject to severe cuts (NOAA's budget has yet to be released). The House was in the initial development stages for its spending bill proposals, and the Senate would soon follow with its process. The timing allowed for the articulation of what is at risk should the cuts prevail. Policy topics varied by relevance to district and member interest, and ranged from sea lion management to the importance of the Farm Bill's Conservation Title to fish and wildlife.

Website Redesign

On Sunday, March 24, our agency launched a new website. The new site is designed to help customers quickly access the content they're looking for, enhance security, and improve accessibility. If you haven't visited the site – www.wdfw.wa.gov - from your phone yet, I invite you to do so. At 8 a.m. when the site launched, a razor clam dig was in progress and 75% of the people visiting our pages were doing so from mobile devices. So far, website load times have been fast, and public response has been quiet, yet primarily positive. Public Affairs staff continue to fine-tune the website, so feel free to share suggestions via webmaster@dfw.wa.gov.

As background, the WDFW website receives approximately 10 million visits each year, and the agency has put considerable effort into creating a product that performs well for customers, the general public, and others.

Social Media

Between mid-February to mid-March, WDFW Facebook content was seen by people 459,609 times.

In-person Outreach

In March, staff from across WDFW reached out to the public statewide in an array of engaging ways, including:

- The Tundra Swan Festival in Camas

- The Bighorn Show in Spokane
- A presentation to 60 fourth graders at Trent Elementary in Spokane Valley
- A steelhead fishing event at Cowlitz River
- Habitat education via a Cub Scout Community Event in Rochester
- Bat conservation at the Washington State Farmers Market Conference in Walla Walla

Outreach and Public Engagement

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife organized a Steelhead Fishing 101 event on Saturday, March 16. The purpose of this event was to provide participants with the basics that would allow them to feel comfortable fishing for steelhead on their own and show them a spot where they may do so. The event was held at the Barrier Dam Boat Launch in Salkum, WA – a spot that provides excellent bank access on the Cowlitz River for steelhead fishing. The event began with an introduction to rules and regulations for steelhead fishing from Kelly Riordan, seasoned fisherman and WDFW employee. Next, basic gear requirements and options for setting up a rod were covered, and participants could follow along to learn how to assemble it all themselves. After everyone was fitted with the proper set-up, they were led to the shore to test out their new gear and skills.

Participants spent the afternoon trying out different rod set-ups and those with less experience had the opportunity to spend time perfecting their casting technique and knot-tying skills. Though no one landed any steelhead, as one participant put it, “A bad day fishing is better than a good day at work”.

Take a look at all the photos here: <https://wdfw.box.com/v/steelheadfishing>



Special thanks to those who made this event possible:

Fish Program

Bruce Baker
David Stormer

Marketing

Kelly Riordan
Ali Zigerelli
Alex Biswas

Fish Program

Smelt Update

Going into 2019, models based on ocean conditions and prior run sizes forecasted a 2019 run size lower than 2018 abundance. Managers recommended a closure of commercial and recreational fisheries in 2019 to protect the small run and help rebuild Eulachon stocks for future years. At the beginning of March, reports of predator activity in the Columbia River indicated a smelt run had arrived. The initial run into the Cowlitz River started March 4-5 and continued through March 13, 2019. It is unknown how much longer this run will last. Despite the unexpected run, the minimal monitoring data we have suggests it is still not a large enough run to support a recreational fishery at this time, which in previous years has totaled around 140,000-290,000 pounds of smelt harvested in just a 1-2 day recreational fishery in the Cowlitz River. Limited funding allows for only baseline monitoring on the Columbia River. Additionally, the Warm Springs, Yakama, and Umatilla tribes conduct limited harvest for ceremonial and subsistence purposes. The Cowlitz Tribe is involved in research to monitor the smelt run. The tribe is permitted to retain the catch for ceremonial and subsistence purposes. Thus far, preliminary estimates of combined tribal harvest is approximately 4000 lbs of smelt harvested.

Update on Invasive European Green Crab Management

The Salish Sea is at high risk of invasion from European green crabs (EGC). Potential impacts of an EGC invasion in the Salish Sea include threats to the harvest of wild and commercially grown shellfish, the Dungeness crab fishery, and salmon recovery (and by extension threats to orca recovery) - all of which negatively impact the human uses and cultural resources of the Salish Sea. The current response to early detections of EGC in the Salish Sea is a success story seldom seen in the world of Aquatic Invasive Species management. Rather than playing 'catch up', we still appear to be ahead of the curve and are working aggressively to understand, identify and prevent incursions of EGC before they take hold and cause the dramatic impacts to the Salish Sea ecology and shellfish industry.

To accomplish this, the Department collaborated with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Washington Sea Grant, and the Puget Sound Partnership to produce the Salish Sea Transboundary Action Plan (Plan). Director Susewind recently began the signature campaign for the Plan and the other co-authors will be signing soon. Once signed by all the co-authors, the Department will conduct outreach to other local, state, federal, and tribal partners for signing onto the Plan. Implementation of the Plan will guide the next two-year's efforts and provide a foundation to seek long-term state and federal funding.

Extension of Recreational, Subsistence and Commercial Fishing Closure for Elwha River and Its Tributaries

The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, Olympic National Park, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife agree that it is necessary to extend the fishing closure in the Elwha River for another two years, from June 1, 2019 to July 1, 2021. The fishing closure applies to all recreational, subsistence and commercial fishing in the Elwha River and its tributaries. A fishing moratorium in these waters has been in place since 2011 to protect depleted native salmonid populations, including four federally listed fish species which are needed to re-colonize habitats between and upstream of the two former dam sites. Mountain lakes in the

Elwha basin within Olympic National Park and Lake Sutherland will remain open to sport fishing from the fourth Saturday in April through October 31. The Elwha River is monitored to evaluate spawner abundance, extent of distribution, and juvenile production throughout the system using a variety of tools including sonar, redd surveys, snorkel surveys, and smolt trapping. Monitoring has shown that salmon and steelhead populations are expanding into newly opened habitats, but have not yet achieved recovery goals. Recreational, subsistence and commercial fishing will resume when there is broad distribution of spawning adults in newly accessible habitats above the former dam sites, and when spawning occurs at a rate that allows for population growth and diversity, producing adequate escapement and a harvestable surplus. Monitoring ecosystem recovery in the Elwha is a cooperative effort among Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, Olympic National Park, NOAA Fisheries U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), U.S. Geological Survey, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The restoration of salmonid spawning and rearing in habitats upstream of the former Glines Canyon Dam is paramount to successful restoration. These early re-colonizers play an important role in establishing spawning and juvenile rearing in habitats of the upper watershed. Final impediments to upstream migration were removed from the Glines Canyon dam site in 2016. To date, adult salmonids have been observed as high as river mile 40 in the Elwha.

Wildlife Program

Director's Hunt Permits for Terminally Ill Persons

The department issued 10 Director's hunt permits for terminally ill persons in 2018. Of the 10, there were five moose permits and five elk permits. All five moose hunters harvested, while three of the five elk hunters harvested.

Beaver Relocation Pilot Project

The Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 77.32.585 directs the Department to permit the release of wild beavers. In 2017, this RCW was revised to allow beaver release statewide, whereas previously it only allowed beaver to be released on the eastside. Since that time, the department has worked with a stakeholder group (the Beaver Working Group) along with staff from the Wildlife and Habitat Programs to develop a new permit for beaver relocation. This new permit will replace the use of Scientific Collection Permits for beaver relocation and will better address needs specific to beaver relocation.

The Department will implement the new beaver relocation permit as a pilot project per RCW 34.05.313. This will allow the department to monitor and evaluate the program before making a determination whether to codify. The pilot was initiated and publicly announced through the CR-101 in March 2019, and the first permits issued will be valid as of April 1, 2019. During the pilot, the Department will select volunteer participants. Only these selected participants will be eligible for a beaver relocation permit. The pilot will last for at least two years and up to four years to allow time for a thorough assessment.

Wolf Updates

The department filed a CR-101 (WSR 18-20-084) on October 1, 2018 to initiate the process for a periodic status review of gray wolves. The Department conducts periodic status reviews on all listed species to evaluate whether populations are recovering.

The delisting criteria in Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 220-610-110 indicates the Fish and Wildlife Commission shall delist a wildlife species from endangered, threatened, or sensitive solely on the basis of the biological status of the species being considered, based on the preponderance of scientific data available.

It also indicates a species may be delisted from endangered, threatened, or sensitive when it meets the recovery plan goals OR (emphasis added) when it is no longer in danger of failing, declining, are no longer vulnerable to factors like limited numbers, disease, predation, exploitation, or habitat loss or change.

Region 1

Wildlife Area Emergency Closures:

Wildlife Program Staff implemented an emergency closure on various lands within the Blue Mountains Wildlife Area Complex to minimize disturbance to wintering big game from human activity. The closures affected approximately 27,000 acres of wildlife area lands in Asotin and Garfield Counties. Wildlife Area staff members spent the majority of the March 11 – March 14 work week posting closure signs in winter working conditions. ATVs equipped with tracks were used to access many snowed in boundaries. In addition to the wildlife area entry closures, Asotin County closed Cougar Creek road on the 4-O wildlife area to public use in support of WDFW's efforts. Though closed to public use, private property owners still have access to their property should they have a need. The closures will be lifted by the Department on April 1; although the County may continue with some closures to protect public roadways.

Outreach and Education:

March was busy for public outreach in the Eastern Region, with Staci Lehman accompanying other staff members to several community events and speaking opportunities. A few of those events included presentations to multiple Spokane-area 4th grade classes about fish species and stocking area lakes, tabling and giving a presentation at the Tundra Swan Festival in northeast Washington, and Region 1's largest event of the year- the Big Horn Show at the Spokane Interstate Fairgrounds. This year's show was record setting for attendance, as well as for license and Discover Pass sales.

Westslope Cutthroat Trout Restoration:

WDFW Staff in Northeast Washington are beginning the planning and permitting component of a Rotenone treatment project of Flume Creek in Pend Oreille County. This work is foundational to implementing a successful treatment and ensures compliance with rules and regulations. This is an important project for the restoration of native Westslope Cutthroat Trout in the Pend Oreille River basin. This project is one of many that will occur over the next 30 years to remove nonnative Brook Trout from tributaries to the Pend Oreille River and reestablish native Westslope Cutthroat. This project will be done collaboratively with Seattle City Light, as part of their FERC relicensing agreement. Other partners in the project will be the Pend Oreille PUD, the United States Forest Service, the USFWS, the Kalispel Tribe and a host of volunteer groups.

Region 2

Colville Tribes Annual Coordination Meeting

Region 2 Director Brown and Region 1 Director Pozzanghera participated in an annual coordination two-day meeting with the Colville Tribes in Spokane. This meeting was also attended in part by Commissioners Thorburn and Graybill as well as several Tribal Council members and the Council Chairman. This meeting is about sharing of information regarding co-management of fish and wildlife resources, and improving the way we coordinate our activities for conservation of these resources.

Elk Damage issues in the Peshastin area mount

The Peshastin area of Chelan County has a long history of up and down cycles of elk related agricultural damage impacting high value fruit production. Staff are working with growers to address specific problem areas with some targeted take of animals causing damage. They are exploring past agency actions to have increased localized elk permits, or master hunter permits in the area through the agency's normal season setting process. In the past we have opened those localized hunts for a few seasons, and then reduced or removed the season when the damage problem is reduced. Likely, we will be exploring some similar options in the next year, or two. No proposal has been developed for this as of yet. But we are working on the issue.

Region 3

Habituated Elk

Substantial media coverage since early February has focused on the saga of a single highly habituated elk, called "Buttons" by many. Her story dates back to about 2012 according to some accounts. She was presumed an orphaned calf, and community members near Cle Elum stepped in to "rescue" her. She was hand-raised, and over a series of years became extremely habituated to humans. She gained national notoriety about 2015 when she entered a wildland firefighter camp and was photographed nuzzling firefighters. She continued to roam the countryside between Cle Elum and Thorp and became endeared to some residents and a nuisance to others. In late January of 2019, she became entangled in a garden hose and carried it around her neck for several days. WDFW responded to these reports and prepared to dart her and remove the hose. She was finally seen free of the hose the same morning that WDFW staff were prepared to intervene. At that time, WDFW managers looked more deeply into the situation that existed with this elk, and became increasingly alarmed about her interactions with people. It was apparent that people continually fostered extremely close contact with this elk. She was known to enter buildings in search of human food, was regularly brushed and petted by people, and children were placed on her back for photos. She was regularly hand fed by people; her offerings included human junk food.

In early February, WDFW initiated an attempt to see if she could be integrated back into life with wild elk. She was relocated to the Wenas valley and placed at the Mellotte elk feedsite. This location, where about 700 wild elk were being fed daily, within an area closed to public entry and behind an elk fence, seemed like the best scenario to attempt a rewilding. This was a longshot, but everyone believed it was worth trying. During the next

several weeks, while field staff monitored the situation at Mellotte, the Regional Wildlife Program Manager and the agency Wildlife Veterinarian continued to explore options for permanent captivity for this elk, if that turned out to be necessary. About 10 facilities were asked about rehoming this elk. All but two declined. A wildlife park in Oregon seemed a possibility until ODFW declined permission to move the elk across the state line. Fortunately, Woodland Park Zoo agreed to consider taking this elk. By late February, the elk showed no signs of integrating with wild elk at Mellotte. In early March, the elk was taken back into WDFW custody and placed in a specially constructed stall at a WDFW barn. This facilitated medical screening required by Woodland Park. She passed her extensive health screen, and on March 15, the elk has transferred to Woodland Park Zoo. This was covered extensively by the media. The elk is in 30-day quarantine at Woodland Park and will then be introduced to Woodland Park's three other elk at the Northern Trail Exhibit.

WDFW and Woodland Park have put considerable effort into using this story to help people understand the dilemmas created when people habituate wildlife. Many media accounts have also included this messaging. It is unfortunate that this elk will never live among free-ranging wild elk. Permanent captivity was the best of the remaining options still possible, but this effort consumed a substantial amount of WDFW resources.

Yakima Basin Integrated Plan and Kachess River Fish Rescue

Habitat Program staff in Region 3 continue to work on various project deliverables supporting the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan through a capital project contract with Ecology. A significant part of our work includes collecting baseline data regarding bull trout demographics and distribution, identifying limiting factors to recovery, and identifying and developing recovery actions in support of the Kachess Drought relief pumping plant, a Capital Water Supply Project in the upper Yakima River Basin.

WDFW staff annually surveys upper Yakima River reservoir tributaries for bull trout redds and upstream-migrating adults. The Lake Kachess bull trout population is extremely depressed with 20-30 redds counted each year. Portions of the lower Kachess River dewater annually, although direct and indirect impacts to downstream migrating bull trout is unknown. During recent surveys, large numbers of juvenile bull trout were found dying in isolated pools. Although it was unplanned work, WDFW staff took action in coordinating with biologists from various state and federal resource agencies, tribes, and stakeholder volunteers to assist in night rescue efforts. Most of the rescue work occurred at night when juvenile bull trout are more easily observed and captured, but daytime efforts were used because the increased difficulty in finding available personnel at night. WDFW staff and volunteers rescued 880 juvenile bull trout from desiccation or predation, far beyond expectations! Without funding provided by the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan to implement conservation efforts, bull trout recovery is unlikely.

Habitat and Fish Programs are jointly submitting a grant for USFWS Recovery Implementation Program funds for 2019, to expand, monitor, and assess the contribution of rescue efforts to recover upper Yakima River Basin bull trout.

Region 4

Skagit Elk Management

As the grass began to green up in on the Skagit farms, elk impacts continued to ramp up. To improve response to farmers, Wildlife Conflict staff focused on a few resident subgroups for targeted hazing and hunting. This is a new approach that we hope results in change in behavior of the elk. We are attempting to reestablish an ecology of fear in the animals. We will be reviewing our actions and the results. This information will be used to set our strategy for next year. Working with co-managers, we are completing the helicopter annual survey. Results will be available in May.

Atlantic Salmon

The WDFW approved the five year finfish aquaculture permit for Cooke Aquaculture. In order to operate in Puget Sound, Cooke must hold a valid Marine Finfish Aquaculture Permit. This permit is not the same as the Finfish Transport Permit, rather it is a five-year permit to operate marine aquaculture facilities in Washington. Cooke's current five-year permit to raise Atlantic salmon expires July 2019. In January 2019 Cooke submitted two applications to WFDW: a renewal application to continue current operations for Atlantic salmon, and a second application to raise all-female triploid steelhead in existing net-pen facilities in Puget Sound.

The renewal application to continue current operations for Atlantic salmon was approved. Please note that although this is a five-year permit, as per 2018 legislation, the permit will become void when existing aquatic land leases from Department of Natural Resources expire in 2022. The new application to raise steelhead in existing Puget Sound net pens reflects substantive changes in operations and must go through the SEPA process.

Region 5

Columbia River Management Unit

Region 5 hosted the Columbia River North of Falcon meeting #1 on March 18 for discussions regarding lower river (including Buoy 10) fall fishery seasons. Most forecasts are lower than recent years, so opportunities will be limited. Staff are working to find ways to provide opportunities to access an abundant Coho return. Staff is also working to develop the sturgeon estuary fishery this spring that will be set through the Columbia River Compact.

Fish Program

Hatchery staff are closely watching winter steelhead returns at key Region 5 facilities due to concerns about returns to the Kalama and Cowlitz rivers. Runs appear to be tracking behind due to colder and drier conditions in February and early March. Decisions regarding fishery restrictions are expected by the first week of April.

Wildlife Program:

The March elk count on the Mudflow Unit of the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area was 314 total elk, the highest count for the winter.

Region 5 staff assisted Region 6 and Headquarters staff in completing three days of flights to survey elk in the northern portion of the Willapa Hills. Almost 900 elk were counted, with raw numbers indicating a pretty strong number of calves and robust bull to cow ratios.