



SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA 2009 MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife



Land Management Summary

This is an update to the 2006 Skagit Wildlife Area Management Plan the full plan document can be found at this link. http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/. The plan provides management direction for the Skagit Snoqualmie Wildlife Area Complex that includes the numerous satellite units of Skagit Wildlife Area and a large portion of the Skagit Bay Estuary, which totals 16,708 acres in Skagit, Island, and San Juan counties and the five Snoqualmie

units, approximately 2,780 acres in King and Snohomish Counties. The plan identifies needs and guides activities on the area based on the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Mission of “*Sound Stewardship of Fish and Wildlife*” and its underlying statewide goals and objectives as they apply to local conditions.

Plans are updated annually as habitat and species conditions change, as new regulations and scientific knowledge develop, as public issues and concerns evolve, and as administration of wildlife areas change. This management plan update also includes 2008 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies and performance measures for 2009.

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Updates/Changes

WDFW budget and financial summary – Washington State like the remainder of the U.S. will be impacted by the current economic downturn the nation has experienced the past few months. State agencies such as WDFW will bear a certain share of this economic crisis as consumer spending slows creating shortfalls from expected revenues. The next biennium’s budget was completed at the end of April 2009 and it appears that WDFW will be assuming a budget shortfall target of **\$23.7** million from last biennium. This shortfall will be distributed throughout the agency but the specific impact to wildlife programs such as our wildlife area operating

budgets or the western Washington pheasant program are unknown but will be clarified in the coming months. The main impact of this budget situation is the reduction in force plan (layoff) that goes into effect the now through the end of this biennium. Approximately 80 existing positions will be eliminated resulting in a major shift in the work force and in the short-term impacts to our agency's ability to provide services and support our existing staff.

Milltown Island – WDFW and Skagit River System Cooperative submitted an application for Stimulus Recovery Act money to expand the restoration effort on Milltown Island. The restoration objectives of the project are to: reestablish riverine and tidal flow to isolated portions of the historic estuary, reestablish estuarine distributary channels and blind channel networks, remove and control invasive plant species, and reestablish native estuarine/wetland plant species. Milltown Island was able to qualify for this “shovel ready” funding since the permits could be easily extended following last summers project work. Proposals were submitted in early April and notification of project acceptance should occur by the end of May.

Navy Study on Skagit Bay Estuary – In the summer and fall of 2008, WDFW was approached by a group of scientist funded by the Office of Naval Research to allow access to the Skagit Bay estuary near Craft Island. These researchers from all over the U.S. are interested in various aspects of tidal delta development and the geomorphic and hydrologic processes involved. The data gathered about sediment transport, flow in tidal channels, vegetation development, and other hydrologic characteristics will be used to improve existing models of tidal delta development. Additional data will be gathered during the summer and fall of 2009 predominately on the delta near the North Fork of the Skagit River.

North Fork Project – Dike District 22 has initiated a project to remove a failing tide gate and an 800-foot long east west spur dike and improve the adjacent north-south bay front dike. Improvements to 1,500-feet of the north-south dike will include increasing the dike elevation, establishing a driving surface on top of the dike and removal of non-functional tide gate infrastructure from the north-south bay front dike. The material removed from the spur dike will be used to improve the north-south dike by increasing its height to 15.5 feet above sea level. The top of the north-south dike will be widened to 12 feet to allow vehicle passage and be treated with drivable surface material. The material removed from the spur dike will also be used to backfill the void created by removal of the tide gate infrastructure. Citizen Advisory Group (CAG) members have voiced a desire to improve access area to this area such as parking and foot bridges over tidal channels. A footbridge will be developed over the removed culvert providing access to the tide flats.

Skagit Delta Agricultural MOA process - The Wiley Slough Collaborative process brought together recreational communities concerns related to the conversion of habitat and loss of access resulting from the intertidal restoration of the Headquarters Unit. Following this process, a group of stakeholders, representing conservation, recreation and agriculture interests, gathered to provide guidance in the development of WDFW's vision for conservation land acquisition for the Skagit Delta.

The diverse natural resources of the Skagit basin are the foundation for the health, economic viability, cultural well being, and quality of life for future generations. The agricultural land

base provides a link that is a crucial for a successful strategy that considers the habitat needs for fish and wildlife, public recreational use, and other non-agricultural uses. Agricultural crop habitat such as seed crops, corn, wheat, grasslands and seasonal wet areas found in open farmland are important to a variety of wildlife. Estuaries and fresh water wetlands are important for fish and many species of wildlife.

For the agricultural community, prime farmland must be protected and preserved for long-term agricultural purposes. At the same time conservation of the Skagit ecosystem will require protection, management and restoration of critical habitats and functions that achieves the objectives and goals of Puget Sound conservation priorities and salmon recovery.

An important outcome of the workgroup is develop guidance for WDFW to identify lands determined to have high value for conservation while recognizing the need to maintain the agricultural land mass and infrastructure needed to sustain the industry. Identification of alternatives beyond fee simple land purchase needs to be identified, researched, considered and utilized for conservation, recreation, fish habitat and wildlife needs.

The goal is to craft land conservation management and acquisition guidance for WDFW that:

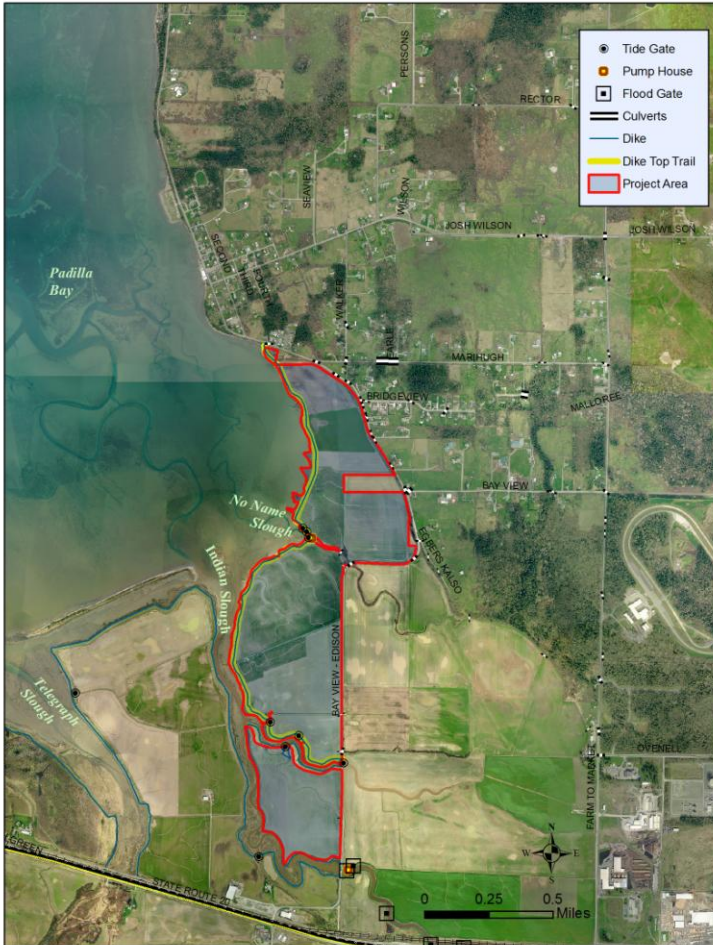
- Describes and encourages an array of management options, including conservation easements, landowner agreements and fee simple land acquisition where appropriate, for public recreation, fish and wildlife habitat while minimizing the impacts on agricultural land uses.
- Identifies and improves the long-term vision and predictability of the land base for WDFW and agricultural community.
- Incorporates stakeholder interests involved in this process.
- Adapt and endures in the face of change (e.g. climate change and land use).
- Provides a legacy of sustainable agriculture, together with ecosystem health, public recreation, and fish and wildlife use for future generations.

A final report will be made available in the Fall 2009.

Fir Island Farms/Snow Goose Reserve Restoration – A proposal has been submitted by the WDFW to the Salmon Recovery Funding Board (SRFB) to acquire funding for a feasibility study on the Fir Island Farms property. This funding will examine the physical and social issues related to the potential restoration of Brown, Claude O. Davis and Dry Sloughs (Fir Island Farm/Hayton Snow Goose Reserve). The basic project objective is to restore estuary-rearing habitat for ESA-listed salmon and improve the habitat condition both in and outside the current dike system on Skagit Bay. This project has been identified in the Skagit Wildlife Area plan as a part of the House Bill 1418 Report on Tide gates and Salmon Habitat restoration priorities.

On a separate note, the Fir Island Farms property was listed as a part of a settlement decree for a court case between the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community and Skagit County Dike District #22. WDFW was not a party to this lawsuit or settlement decree. However, WDFW will work with the involved parties during this feasibility process as a part of our Technical Advisory Group.

Johnson DeBay Slough Swan Reserve – A proposal has been submitted to the Puget Sound Energy Foundation to request funds to improve recreational access to this site by developing a viewing tower and improving ADA access viewing platform. Trumpeter Swan Society developed the grant proposal to request design and implementation money for this project. This proposal was not funded.



South Padilla Bay – WDFW acquired approximately 240 acres along South Padilla Bay in the hopes of developing a wetland restoration project that would impact approximately 600 acres of wetlands and estuary along the south end of Padilla Bay. However following acquisition, the agricultural community voiced strong oppositions to the public ownership and restoration proposal. A group of interested stakeholders were convened to discuss the acquisition and initial project feasibility. A summary report was produced with the preliminary designs produced from discussions between Department of Ecology, Padilla Bay Foundation, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Dike and Drainage District 12, Ducks Unlimited and Western Washington Agricultural Association. This report outlines restoration constraints and opportunities as well as identifying potential stakeholder that

might be interested in the next level of project development and implementation. Management options include a variety of projects to improve fish and wildlife habitat within a working agricultural system and a growing residential community as well as providing increased opportunities for fish and wildlife oriented outdoor education and recreation. The proximity of these new properties to other state and local ownerships provide an excellent opportunity to develop local partnerships and cooperative projects. Focus group and stakeholder meetings are being scheduled for later in the fall 2009.

Wiley Slough Collaborative – WDFW passed funding from the legislature to the Washington Waterfowl Association for the development of a private land access plan. A consultant prepared a business plan and outline for the development of a program that would keep agricultural land in private ownership but would also provide public access and hunting opportunity. A final report

titled “Heritage Lands, a Lower Skagit River Regional Private Lands-Public Access Program” was prepared for submission to the legislature.

Additional meetings were held with the Wiley Collaborative group and Skagit Snoqualmie CAG members to provide updates and project status of the Wiley Slough restoration. There was also an effort to prioritize the list from the collaborative report to focus the effort with the current funding.

New Issues

Johnson DeBay Slough Swan Reserve – The boundary of the reserve came under question when it was determined that the intended reserve boundary and the one described in the regulation guide were not the same. In addition, the boundary described in the regulation guide was not complete. At the same time a neighboring property owner requested from the WDFW Commission that a portion of his property be removed from reserve status. The WDFW Commission made an interim decision to have an adjusted reserve boundary until more information on the issue can be made available. WDFW staff and representatives from the Trumpeter Swan Society were directed to work with the landowner and have been negotiating a potential land trade or acquisition. The WDFW Commission will vote on the reserve boundary during the October 2009 meeting.

Public access during hunting season – Wildlife area staff presented an access restriction proposal to the CAG members during a February 24 meeting (summary on page 11). The CAG was asked to consider restricting access on certain sites to hunters only during the hunting season. Manager Garrett outlined the safety concerns of confined access on the remaining dikes following restoration on sites such as Headquarters and Spencer Island Units. More hunting and bird watching activity would be concentrated on to a much smaller area. A gentleman from the Everett area described his experience on Spencer Island during the last hunting season. Most of the CAG members did not oppose the proposal to restricting access during the hunting season. One representative from Audubon did not agree with the proposal because he did not feel that he had the authority to speak on this issue for all the members.

Wildlife Program staff requested an additional meeting for the general public to inform and provide input on the issue. A public meeting was held August 24, 2009. The public was not supportive of restricting the area during hunting season. They would like to see more signage and educational information for outdoor etiquette and respect for other activities. This information will be summarized and provided to Olympia staff for final decisions.

Major Stewardship Accomplishments

Wiley Slough Restoration Project Phase 1 – The Wiley Slough Restoration Project was designed to restore approximately 157 acres of tidal estuarine habitat at the Headquarters Area. The main goal of the project is to restore natural processes, conditions, functions, and biological responses to the project area specifically by removing dikes to restore riverine and tidal flooding in the project area. The species of particular management interest are ESA-threatened Chinook salmon, other salmonids and wintering waterfowl. Project implementation began last summer.

The basic design elements included in Phase 1 were the development of setback dikes and installation of the new tide gate structure. This phase was completed in time for the pheasant and waterfowl hunting seasons.



Phase 2 restoration elements include the development of a retention pond north of the new tide gate structure, removal of the bay front and riverine dikes, removal of the old tide gate structure and development of the boat launch parking area. These major elements were completed the summer of 2009. Additional public use improvements and plantings will continue through the winter 2010.

Agricultural Enhancements – On the Skagit Wildlife Area in 2009 approximately 1,120 acres of agriculture enhancements were provided through contract farming agreements and staff time. Standing crops were provided on the primary hunting units on the Skagit WA: Island, Johnson DeBay’s Slough and Samish Units. Barley was planted on the Samish and Island Units to provide winter forage for waterfowl and provided enhanced hunting opportunities for the sportsman of Washington State. Corn was only planted on Johnson’s DeBay’s Slough Hunt unit. In addition, winter wheat and rye grass provided winter forage for the snow geese on the Fir Island/ Hayton Snow goose reserve, and corn was provided on the Johnson/DeBay Slough Swan Reserve.

Status Report of 2008 Performance Measures

Key performance measures are identified each year to monitor progress and identify any issues that might interfere with planned priority activities. This information will be used to delete, add or alter priority strategies for 2009.

Ongoing Performance Measures:

- Secure wetland habitat in the English Boom, Port Susan, Livingston, Skagit and South Padilla Bay areas for protection, restoration and enhancement purposes as identified by the Pacific Coast Joint Venture Plan (**Skagit Bay Estuary**).
- Identify noxious and invasive weeds and inventory species and distribution on all units
- Determine the risk or threat level of 18 weed species to develop control priorities
- Develop programs and funding strategies (with WDFW staff, Citizen Advisory Group and others) to successfully buy/lease land for recreational purposes
- Plant up to 610 acres of **Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve** in cereal grains.
- Investigate transfer of **Sinclair Island** and **Goat Island** to State Parks Department (this unit is boat access only).
- Coordinate public use of Fir Island dike trails (**Skagit Bay Estuary**) with Dike District #22 for waterfowl hunting access.
- Evaluate liability of unauthorized public use of historic infrastructure (concrete military structures) on **Goat Island Unit**

- Educate hunters and enforce the 15-shell limit, with enforcement officers, on the **Samish** and **Island units** to provide quality and increased hunting opportunities.
- Inventory newly acquired **Bald Eagle Natural Area** properties transferred from the Department of Natural Resources.
- Evaluate potential fish passage options at **Johnson Debay's Slough** with interested stakeholder groups.
- Work with WDOT and interested stakeholders in establishing fish passage at **Telegraph Slough** and Hwy. 20.
- Develop recreational use plans, with District Team and Citizen Advisory Group, for **Goat Island, Samish, Headquarters Unit** and all other major units that are compatible with fish, wildlife and habitat objectives

2009 and Ongoing Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2009 Related Activity/ Comments
Coordinate with the Puget Sound Partnership efforts to restore 2,682 acres of wetlands in the Skagit River delta (Skagit Bay Estuary)	Continue with Wiley Slough planning and implementation.	Completed project construction phase of Wiley Slough restoration. Additional projects related to access and amenities remain to be completed.
Work with WDFW Weed Crew to monitor and control approximately 150 acres of known problem weeds such as knotweed, purple loosestrife, spartina, thistle spp., poison hemlock, and Scotch broom on the Headquarters, Island, Leque Island and Samish units		Wildlife area staff worked with the WDFW weed crew to treat purple loosestrife and yellow iris in the Skagit Bay Marsh near the Wiley Slough Restoration. Wildlife area staff mowed the thistle on the Samish unit.
Plant approximately 80 acres at Headquarters Unit 165 acres of Island Unit 145 acres of Johnson/DeBay Swan Reserve 215 acres of Leque Island Unit 280 acres of Samish Unit	Completed (acres planted) Headquarters not planted Island- Barley (125) DeBay- Corn (12) remainder in winter wheat Leque- Not planted Samish- Barley (240)	Continue as budget allows
Flood up to 60 acres (Headquarters Unit) and 70 acres (Island Unit)	Headquarters unit restored to intertidal.	Completed
Identify at least four areas where shorebird habitat exists and could be easily be enhanced (Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve, Island, Leque Island and Samish units)	Water control and flood capabilities are currently limited on the wildlife area or impacts current agricultural enhancement program.	Water control limited

2009 and Ongoing Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2009 Related Activity/ Comments
Maintain 50 footbridges on Headquarters, Samish, Leque Island and Island Units	Volunteer work party with Washington Waterfowl Association to put in new footbridges and replaced/improved existing ones on the Samish Unit.	.
Establish and maintain stewardship groups for Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve, Goat Island, Leque Island and other major units where justified	Scheduling new groups or committee is difficult with the other current activities.	No change
Post regulatory signs on Goat Island and Guemes Island units	Needs further review by the District Team and citizen advisory group	No change
Apply for grants to control weeds, plant native vegetation, and use the WDFW Weed Crew	Grant funding received from RCO for planting on Headquarters and Leque Island Unit.	
Explore tidal marsh restoration alternatives at Dry Slough on the Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve	A feasibility proposal is being develop for submission to the SRFB in 2009.	
Evaluate, with CAG and District Team, current fish and wildlife resource value of pheasant plot parcels and, if appropriate, determine the process for disposal	Low priority with the current project load.	No progress
Develop a prioritized list of units in which to conduct an inventory of species, use and needs	Unfunded – Need to begin discussion with District Team and CAG.	
Establish guidelines for building hunting blinds on the Skagit Wildlife Area.	No action at this time	

New Strategies

The wildlife area plan identifies many strategies or activities to address the agencies strategic plan goals and objectives, why the area was purchased, habitat conditions, species presence, and public issues and concerns. The following updated strategies have been added to respond to previously unaddressed or new issues or changes on the wildlife area. New strategies may also be in response to adaptive management as staff evaluate the impacts of past management activities.

Agency Objective: Protect, restore and enhance fish and wildlife populations and their habitats.

1. Manage Species Diversity

A. Strategy: Concerns exist regarding the impact of recreational activity on wildlife habitat and populations. To address these concerns the District Team will evaluate public use and

wildlife populations to determine if public use restrictions are necessary and if so to develop a proposal to establish a Wildlife Reserve on the Cottonwood Island Unit.

Agency Objective: Ensure WDFW activities, programs, facilities and lands are consistent with local, state and federal regulations that protect and recover fish, wildlife and their habitats.

1. Protect federally listed species.

WDFW is currently working through a Habitat Conservation Planning process with US Fish and Wildlife Service to identify all activities on our wildlife areas and how these activities have the potential to impact endangered species. This review will identify potential impacts and develop way to minimize and mitigate these impacts.

A. Strategy: Work with WDFW HCP planning staff to implement HCP process.

2008 Performance Measures

Performance measures for the Skagit Wildlife Area are listed below. Accomplishments and progress toward desired outcomes will be monitored and evaluated annually.

2008 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2009 Related Activity/ Comments
Implement, with Skagit River Systems Cooperative, restoration of 175 acres on Wylie Slough to intertidal estuary (Headquarters Unit)	Phase 1 construction completed September 2008	Phase 2 construction scheduled to begin May 2009, to be completed September 2009
Implement, with Ducks Unlimited, the restoration of 115 acres on Leque Island to intertidal estuary.	Currently in permitting and detailed project planning phase.	Construction scheduled to begin Summer 2009 but was postponed due to permit appeal process
Engage the Wylie Slough community concerned about the loss of upland habitat and recreational opportunities to develop access alternatives and recommendations.	Funding made available from legislature to investigate the private farmland recreation cooperative. Report completed but not submitted to the legislature.	Additional funds were requested but not available.
Finalize, with Skagit River Systems Cooperative, the restoration design for Milltown Island and implement project (Skagit Bay Estuary)	Potential to implement a controlled burn on portions of the reed canary grass pasture still being considered if the appropriate burn conditions exist.	No additional project work was completed this year.
Determine, with Ducks Unlimited and drainage districts, the feasibility of improving water level management capabilities on Samish and Leque Island, and Island unit wetlands	Samish feasibility and summary draft report being completed by Ducks Unlimited. Leque Island scheduled to begin restoration Summer 2009. Project delayed until next construction season.	Report not completed for Samish.

2008 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2009 Related Activity/ Comments
Train and update existing stewardship groups for Johnson/DeBay Swan Reserve, Samish Unit, Camano Island Natural Area, Guemes Island and Island Unit.	Meeting planned for this spring for DeBay Slough Swan Reserve.	Contacts are being made to redevelop group of DeBay's Slough Swan Reserve.
Develop a conceptual plan, with Ducks Unlimited, on the Island Unit to improve wetland management capabilities for waterfowl	Initiate further data collection and discussions regarding fish passage and utilization issues. Funding has been requested thru a capital budget request and a Duck Stamp proposal will be revised and submitted.	No funding approved
Evaluate proposal for odd/even hunting on the Samish Unit with the CAG and District Team.	Submitted to CAG received only received positive comments.	No progress
Secure long-term lease to use private moorage facility near Headquarters Unit , or move moorage to public land	Long term lease secured. Facility will remain in current location.	Efforts to begin design and repair of facility scheduled to begin Summer 2009
Evaluate, with District Team and Citizen Advisory Group, proposed riparian habitat designs on Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve	Will be completed as part of the feasibility and design study	
Continue to work with interested stakeholders to explore restoration and access options at Cottonwood Island	No Progress	
Begin the Watchable Wildlife subcommittee process to prepare recommendations to present to the District team and CAG for review the watchable wildlife enhancements on Johnson DeBay's Slough Swan Reserve, Fir Island Farms/ Hayton Snow Goose Reserve, Headquarters Restoration and Samish Units , as necessary.	As a part of this process, reconvene the Johnson DeBay Slough Swan Reserve Stewardship Group and develop other stewardships groups	No progress at this time some items of interest have been discussed in the Wiley Slough Collaborative report.
Develop and evaluate (with Citizen Advisory Group, District Team and others) a pheasant release program at other upland unit sites and/or on private property, if owners are willing	Data was collected to examine potential private land leasing locations within North Snohomish and Skagit counties.	Regional Wildlife staff will review and determine funding situation once final budget numbers become available.

Citizens Advisory Group

The Skagit-Snoqualmie Wildlife Area Citizen Advisory Group Meeting was held on February 24, 2009. Those in attendance include:

Rone Brewer	Washington Waterfowl Association
Sharon Swan	Snohomish County Parks
Gary Gibbs	Waterfowl hunter
David Randolph	Dog Trainer
Martha Jordan	Trumpeter Swan Society
Virginia Clark	Pilchuck Audubon
Curt Kramer	Retired Fish and Wildlife Employee
Art Kendall	Washington Waterfowl Association
Pam Pritzl	Skagit Audubon
John Edison	Interested public
Donald DiPaola	Interested public

Issue: Public use management. There are concerns about the general public access on three sites on the Skagit Snoqualmie during the hunting season. These sites have or will undergo increased pressure following intertidal restorations being implemented on WA units.

Response: Don DiPaola gave his account of a hunter/bird watcher incident during the hunting season on the Spencer Island unit and WDFW response. He suggested to the group the site be restricted to only hunting during the hunting season and be carefully posted to inform the public of this change in management. The group was supportive of this proposal and understood the concerns. John presented proposed wording options of the signs for the group to provide input. The group agreed on the wording proposal.

Issue: There was discussion also regarding the closure time frame and which seasons to include. The youth hunt, dove and grouse, early goose season and rabbit season following the general waterfowl.

Response: It was recommended by the group to have the dates at Headquarters and Spencer Island restricted access from Sept 1 thru Jan 31 (not including rabbit season which will need to be restricted on these sites) and Samish would be from Sept 1 through March 15 (to include rabbit).

Issue: The current share crop lease arrangement and the potential to lease a portion of the site to the antique tractor club on Crescent Lake.

Response: Garrett talks about the share crop lease situation on the Crescent Lake site and seeks support to increase cereal grain production on the site and to leave more available for waterfowl hunters.

Kendall - I will support it if it doesn't drain funding resources.

Swan - Why put fertilizer and herbicide if you are doing this for betterment of wildlife

Kramer - Is millet going to colonize if you go to straight barley?

Issue: Tractor Club

Response: CAG agrees - no parking or tractor show

Issue: Jordan presented concerns regarding land ownerships issues for Johnson/Debay's Slough Reserve and requested if the group could support an effort to acquire the in holdings and adjacent property. She also discussed the desire to provide a public use trail along north edge of Reserve field, platform in parking lot, kiosk in outer parking lot. Martha also suggested that if WDFW purchased the north area along river it would be used to extend the area for public hunting, Game Reserve boundary

Kramer supports Halverson purchase.

Issue: Limited hunting on Swan Reserve

Response: CAG supports the concept of purchasing the land based on reestablishing originally intended boundary, purchasing Halverson in holdings, establishing trails, and a potential for land swap with Halverson. Jordan wants to shelve issue of hunting/other management till winter of 09/10.

Issue: Wylie Use Enhancements

Response: A handout was provided to try to summarize the Wiley Slough enhancements and to clarify what items are currently funded and which items were not. There was very little time for discussion but the group was asked to review the document and contact us with questions or comments.

There were questions regarding the Wiley Slough enhancement money and connection of the moorage funding and the Wiley Slough restoration. The decision was made to table the discussion until a later CAG or subcommittee meeting. Kendall suggested have the public comment/input on the second phase of construction of the project.

Want to see the full plan?

Go to -

http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/index.htm

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