



SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA 2012 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 Wildlife Area that includes the numerous satellite units of and a large portion of the Skagit Bay Estuary, totaling 16,708 acres in Skagit, Island and San Juan 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 biennially 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 plan update also includes 2010-11 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies and performance measures for 2012-13.

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Updates/Changes

General Economic Outlook and Effects on the 2011-13 Budget

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is funded by a combination of state general tax revenues, recreational license fees and federal and local contracts. These funds allow the agency to meet its dual mandates of protecting state fish and wildlife resources and providing sustainable fishing and hunting opportunity.

The current economic downturn has created a major state budget shortfall. State General Fund support to WDFW dropped by 37 percent from the 2007-09 biennium to the current 2011-13 biennium. A summary of the 2011 budget challenges and the plan to improve the funding gaps are outlined in the following link: [Facing the Future](#): To learn more about the cuts to the budget and the plan to generate user based revenue options are outlined in the following link: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/about/budget/>

Discover Pass

The **Discover Pass** allows users to enjoy **millions of acres** of Washington state-managed recreation lands, including state parks, water-access points, heritage sites, wildlife and natural areas, trails and trailheads. Funding from the Discover Pass is earmarked to manage and improve the state wildlife areas and access sites.

The WDFW also has an access pass that is provided free of charge to purchasers of hunting and fishing licenses. The access passes are valid at WDFW recreational access parking areas, but do not allow parking at recreational access areas managed by other state agencies.

Puget Sound Nearshore Ecosystem Restoration Project

The Puget Sound Nearshore Ecosystem Restoration Project (PSNERP) is a collaborative effort between government agencies, universities, tribes and environmental organizations. In 2010, PSNERP developed conceptual designs for 36 potential restoration projects. The identified projects will be included in a report to Congress requesting federal authorization to continue pursuing opportunities as these project locations. To learn more about the PSNERP project and the status of the process go to: <http://pugetsoundnearshore.org/index.html>

Five restoration projects have been identified on the Skagit Delta and three of those projects are on WDFW owned or managed lands. The projects are Deepwater Slough Phase 2 (Island Unit), Milltown Island, and Telegraph Slough 1 and 2. To learn more check the website at the following link for the *Strategic Restoration Conceptual Engineering — Final Design Report* <http://www.pugetsoundnearshore.org/cdr.html>

Cottonwood Island

A restoration proposal has been submitted to the Recreation and Conservation Office (Washington Wildlife Recreation Program – State Lands Restoration) to improve off channel habitat on Cottonwood Slough.

Cottonwood Slough is an historic side channel and backwater area of the Skagit River at the junction of the North and South Forks of the River. Currently the Slough is isolated from the river during most flows, due, in part, to the construction of road crossings decades ago to allow the logging of Cottonwood Island. Feasibility work has been completed to evaluate options to reestablish flow in the Slough and to reestablish a backwater area at the Slough outlet. The Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan from 2005 identified that rearing area in the tidal delta is the greatest limiting factor in Skagit Chinook recovery. Recent evidence has shown that juvenile Chinook and other salmon use

backwater areas such as Cottonwood Slough for rearing. Removal of the road crossing will restore and improve access to 2 acres of backwater channel area.

Work to be funded through this proposal includes:

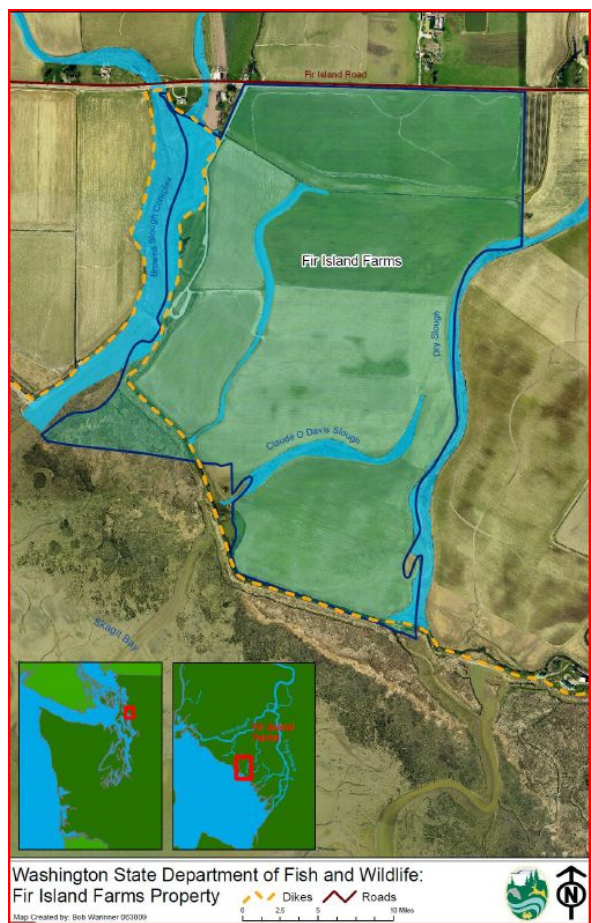
- Hydraulic investigations leading to final design of a project to remove road fill in the lower slough and reestablish the backwater area.
- Permit acquisition for the backwater project
- Determination of placement and design alternative of the inlet structure to reestablish flow in the channel.
- Refined maintenance predictions for the flow through project including quantities and maintenance costs.

Additionally, work funded with this grant will provide information needed to complete feasibility of reconnecting the Cottonwood Slough side channel providing an even greater amount of tidal delta rearing area.

Fir Island Farms/Snow Goose Reserve Restoration

Funding was received from the Salmon Recovery Funding Board (SRFB) for a feasibility study on the Fir Island Farms property. The study is examining the physical and social issues related to the potential restoration of tidal marsh and slough areas located within the Fir Island Farms Unit. The 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.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) own approximately 264 acres of upland in the vicinity of Browns Slough, Dry Slough and Claude Davis Slough (Fir Island Farm) in the Skagit River delta that is currently managed as a reserve for Snow Geese. Approximately 240 acres of the site are farmed. Natural tidal exchange to the site has been eliminated by dikes running along the bay front and along the southeastern side of Browns Slough. The loss of the tidal connection and combined with loss of sediment input from the distributary channels of the Skagit River has greatly reduced tidal channel and marsh habitat compared to historic conditions both inside and outside of the dikes. Currently there are tide gates that allow for upland drainage but block fish passage through the



dikes at Browns Slough, Claude Davis Slough and Dry Slough. The historic connection between Claude Davis Slough and Dry Slough has also been eliminated.

With the assistance of a Steering Committee composed of local partners and stakeholders, different alternatives to restore tidal processes, tidal marsh habitat and tidal channel habitat at the Fir Island Farm site have been evaluated and a preferred restoration alternative selected. The different restoration alternatives evaluated by the feasibility study range from replacing existing tide gates with self-regulating tide gates to varying degrees of relocating the existing tide gates and flood dikes to more landward configurations. All of the restoration alternatives that were evaluated by the feasibility study work to ensure that the drainage capacity, flood protection and salt intrusion protection for the surrounding farms are maintained. Snow goose management, agriculture production, and public access interests were considered in selecting a preferred restoration alternative. Public outreach informed the development and selection of a preferred restoration alternative. WDFW hosted two open house events where interested parties had an opportunity to review and comment on the feasibility study. While the restoration goals of the feasibility study are focused on restoring estuary processes and habitats beneficial to fish and wildlife, the related goals consider land and human uses.

For more detailed information on this project and to see the preferred alternative, http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/skagit/restoration_study.php

Island Unit (Deepwater Slough)

The Island Unit acquisition began in 1950's with the management priorities to provide hunting opportunity and agricultural grain for overwintering waterfowl. This has been a very popular and productive hunting site providing many generations with memorable hunting and recreational opportunities.

Management of the agriculture program on the Island Unit was evaluated in the early 1990's following a dike breach from the 1990 flood and in early 2000's with the partial estuary restoration project (Deepwater Slough). The value of grain for overwintering waterfowl and the recreation opportunity that it provides have been supported by the WDFW and the waterfowl hunting community. The Island Unit management has been focused on traditional values to provide forage for overwintering waterfowl and recreation opportunities. The management program on the Island Unit comes with a full set of logistical, environmental and budgetary challenges that continue to evolve.

Barge: In spring/summer 2011, the 1940's barge used for the transport of equipment and supplies to the Island was red flagged or was determined to be unsafe. Since decommissioning of the barge, a local island ferry service has been used to transport equipment and materials; unfortunately this transport is limited to high tides (over 12' during daylight hours). WA staff began coordinating with a state contract helicopter company to do aerial applications of the seed and fertilizer. Aerial applications reduce transport and equipment costs and line up with potential planting windows more effectively. The effect of aerial seeding on overall yields has not been determined at this time. The costs of planting grains continue to increase, but WA staff is looking into new ways to make this achievable in the future.

Drainage and water conditions: For the past few years, the conditions on the Island Unit have not been conducive to disking and planting during the spring and early summer. Average spring rainfall and the duration of rainfall have increased during the traditional planting time period combined with the main contributor to this the above-average snow pack causing river to run higher than normal for a longer period. In addition, high river levels and the duration of the high river levels have led to substantial subletting of river water (increase of water table levels) into the Island Unit. The weather change and high river levels combined result in a limited drainage window (favorable low tidal cycles and river condition) to allow drainage from the Island Unit back into the river system impacting field work and planting conditions. Yet another factor affecting the disking and planting of the Island Unit is the functionality of the existing drainage system. The drainage system has several issues including: vegetation buildup within drainage ditches, beaver dams, sediment buildup in the ditches and other tidegate related issues. This season in particular, there was an increased area of surface flooding in the fields and the duration of these conditions lasted well into the summer months. For the 2012 planting season, WA staff has only been able to access the fields to disk and plow for about 7 days since mid-April. Wet field conditions would not allow field preparations of the site with farming equipment. During normal weather and river conditions 60 to 100 acres would have been prepared and planted. WDFW continues to look into other wetland management and crop options in agricultural fields that are currently inundated with water. The goal is to plant agricultural crops in selected areas of the Island Unit as weather and river levels allow.



Flooding conditions during the growing season on the Island Unit

Leque Island (Restoration Project)

The WDFW and Ducks Unlimited (DU) proposal to restore a portion of Leque Island to intertidal estuary and provide freshwater wetland enhancements has stalled. Project proponents lacked the community support to necessary to acquire permits from Snohomish County and implement the project. The proposal was funded by a variety of sources that included Salmon Recovery Funding Board and the Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program (ESRP) grants, the funding to implement the project as it was designed are no longer available.

Project opponents filed two legal actions against WDFW and the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT). One law suit was filed to appeal the Hydraulic Permit Application for the Washington Department of Transportation road bank armoring project on the north side of Highway 532 or North Leque Island. The second suit was filed against WDFW and WSDOT for actions of the agencies that resulted in flooding of agriculture land, conversion of use as it relates to the original land purchase agreement and impacts to groundwater.

Both of these cases are pending and in the meantime WDFW and DU are working with hydro-geologists to gather well data to determine how tidal surface water on Leque Island will impact the Camano Aquifer. WDFW and DU established a ground water monitoring program under the guidance of a technical committee that included representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency, Juniper Beach Water District and Island County. It should be noted that the selection of the study design was not unanimous within the group; however the decision was made to move the project forward. Data analysis and modeling report is scheduled to be completed by December 2012. The information from this report will be used to inform the planning process for this site. WDFW plans to initiate a planning process in winter of 2012. The potential to use federal funds for this restoration project have been blocked until the potential ground water effects can be resolved.

The dike and tide gate infrastructure on Leque is compromised and continues to fail. Temporary repairs have been installed on several locations on the south portion of Leque Island to allow time for the ground water study and to protect highway and utility right of ways and infrastructure. In 2013, WSDOT is scheduling a road improvement project on Highway 532 from the Camano Gateway Bridge to the base of the hill on Camano Island. This project will include raising and widening of the road. Current lane design and traffic flow patterns have the potential to affect access to the Leque Island Unit. WDFW staff is working with WSDOT to ensure safe and reasonable access to the site.

Milltown Island

Skagit River Systems Cooperative (SRSC) received additional funding from the ESRP and Constraining Stocks funding through the Pacific Salmon Treaty to conduct further restoration of hydraulic processes to the interior of the island via more extensive breaching of the islands dike. Specifically, to remove an additional 1,378 linear feet of dike at Milltown Island and create 2,648 linear feet of tidal channel in an effort to continue the restoration of tidal function and fish access to an additional 52 acres of scrub-shrub delta wetland habitat. In doing so, the project addresses two objectives identified by the Puget Sound Nearshore Ecosystem Restoration Project: 1) restore tidal flow in river deltas, and 2) restore tidal freshwater wetland quantity and quality. In addition to making these physical alterations to the island, the project proposes extensive work at replanting portions of the island with native plant while controlling invasive and nuisance species that are limiting the scope of complexity of tidal channel development on the island.

South Padilla Bay

WDFW owns and manages approximately 240 acres of agricultural land along South Padilla Bay. This property is currently being leased to local farmers while restoration and enhancement alternatives are being considered. In 2011, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined that WDFW had met the grant obligation for acquisition only and “full restoration” is not required to be in compliance with the grant. The revenue generated from the agricultural program will be used for planning and site development. Planning efforts have been on hold as a result of shifts in Wildlife Program personnel. An expanded Padilla Bay working group is scheduled to be reconvened when a Restoration Project Manager is brought on staff in the fall of 2012. The group will discuss the current project status and the next steps for management and recreational development.

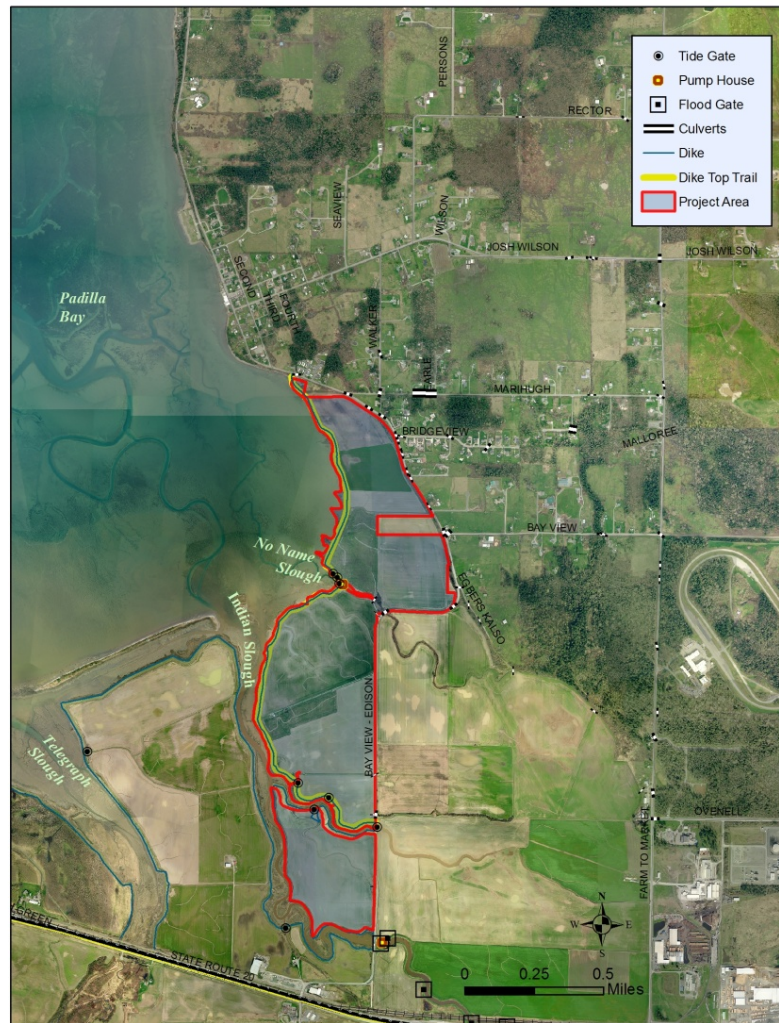
Currently a restricted access hunting program administered through the Waterfowl Quality Hunt Program has established three hunting units on the site. Safety concerns about the proximity to the Skagit County Padilla Bay trail and Bay-view Edison Road prompted a conservative public hunting access approach. Other wildlife oriented recreational options will be considered as a part of the management planning and site development process.

For more information on the Waterfowl Quality Hunt Program, see

<http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/wqhp/>

Wiley Slough Adaptive Management Planning

A multi-agency working group has been formed to examine drainage issues related to Wiley Slough Restoration project and develop adaptive management measures to address the issues. The working group is comprised of representatives from SRSC, USFWS, National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration, ESRP, Dike District #22, and regional and statewide WDFW staff. Initial concerns were focused on the impacts to neighboring farm land, tide gate infrastructure,



and long-term drainage system function. The work group continues to examine adaptive management alternatives to address identified issues.

Partnerships:

Skagit River Systems Cooperative

In addition to field work being completed on Milltown, SRSC is also monitoring projects, maintaining vegetation plantings, and working to develop project level assessments that provide essential information for adaptive management strategies in the South Fork Delta. This will be accomplished by implementing elements of their monitoring strategies for each of the project areas in the South Fork Delta. A comparative analysis of change in biological and physical processes will be conducted at the 157 acre Wiley Slough site, the 300+ acre Milltown Island site, and the 205 acre Deepwater Slough site over time (using preconstruction and post construction data from each site, and by collecting updated snap shots at each site over the 2011 and 2012 water years). In doing this analysis SRSC anticipate the ability to integrate site level data into regional evaluation processes such as Intensively Monitored Watersheds (IMWA) and Puget Sound Scientific Review Technical Team (RITT); and to evaluate and target adaptive management actions to more effectively.

Ducks Unlimited

The Samish wetland enhancement project aims to provide the ability to manage freshwater wetland habitat on approximately 280 acres of the Samish Unit for the benefit of migratory birds and other wetland dependent species. The Samish Unit lies within the lower Samish watershed, which is a highly modified landscape where much of the former estuary has been diked and drained for agriculture. Northern Puget Sound has lost nearly 90% of freshwater wetlands and this site is capable of providing this habitat type due to hydrology and soils present. Additional project constraints such as existing infrastructure, waterfowl benefits, water availability, saltwater intrusion, drainage, flood displacement and conveyance were considered in the development of a preferred design. This design involves creating six individual wetland basins with independent hydrologic management capability on the western and eastern extent of the tract. A 115 acre flood corridor will exist in the center of the site to maintain and improve flood conveyance and storage. The project is intended to provide improved drainage capability to facilitate wetland management (i.e. controlled drawdown or complete drainage for agricultural enhancements, etc.) and/or farming and create the ability to mimic the hydrology of historic seasonal wetlands of the region. Managing hydrology will allow seasonal wetland plant communities to colonize which will in turn benefit a variety of wetland dependent wildlife species and further the WDFW regional vision for habitat projects. This project is currently being reviewed as a part of the WDFW Restoration Framework and once approved the project will move to the permitting and public process stages.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS holds a Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) conservation easement on the Samish River Unit. This easement requires hydrologic and vegetative restoration on the site. Funding has been received to implement a freshwater wetland enhancement on the Samish River Unit. The national objectives of the Wetland Reserve Program are to protect, restore, and enhance the functions and values of wetland ecosystems. The specific objectives of the Samish River Unit

are to create a diversity of wildlife habitats with potential for future enhancement including the opportunity to connect to the river/estuary. The site provides a number of opportunities to enhance wildlife habitat. The project design will incorporate these habitat and recreational aspects:

- Creating swales that will have semi-permanent water that could be connected to the river/estuary in future projects
- De-leveling areas to create seasonal wetlands
- Establishing native vegetation by planting trees, shrubs, and seeding;
- Creating an area for moist soil management that WDFW will be able to manage by compatible use agreement to mow or disk, as feasible.
- Spoils from the project will be used to create the base for a parking lot and viewing area on the site.

The project is moving through the WDFW Restoration Framework and will begin permitting and public process in fall 2012.

Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland

The Skagit Wildlife Area is partnering with the Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland to develop a “Talking Fields” site at the Fir Island Farms Snow goose reserve. The “Talking Fields” program provides a sign with basic information about the program and would be linked to a phone message and/or a website that would provide more detailed information to the public about the how agricultural landscapes can be managed to provide habitat for fish and wildlife species. The sign will provide information about the proposed salmon habitat recovery project and how the current agriculture and the snow goose reserve functions are being addressed in this planning process.

Skagit Watershed Council

The Skagit Wildlife Area is partnering with the Skagit Watershed Council and the Puget Sound Partnership on a website titled Salmon Trails and Tail. It is an interactive website to provide information about salmon recovery efforts in the 14 watersheds in Puget Sound. The desired outcome is to encourage people to visit the naturally restored beauty of the Puget Sound watersheds and the efforts to increase salmon populations through habitat restoration projects. To learn more go to: <http://salmontrails.org/>

Major Stewardship Accomplishments

Skagit - Stillaguamish Delta Reserve - A proposal was submitted to nominate the Skagit - Stillaguamish Delta in northwest Washington as a Site of Regional Importance for Shorebirds by the Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve recognized the. The delta’s rich salt marshes and tidal mud flats serve as vital habitat for migratory birds. It is one of many essential places in the Pacific Flyway where they stop to rest and feed during northward migrations to their breeding grounds and southward migrations during the non-breeding season.

The [Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network](#) (WHSRN) conserves shorebirds and their habitats through a network of key sites in the Americas. To be designated, a site must document its importance for shorebirds and provide written agreement of the landowner(s) that they will make shorebird conservation one of their priorities. By providing formal recognition of these

critical sites, WHSRN promotes and enables their voluntary conservation. If accepted the WHSRN designation raises community awareness about the importance of the site and the value of shorebirds.

To learn more about this and other WHSRN site:

<http://www.whsrn.org/western-hemisphere-shorebird-reserve-network>



DeBay's Slough Unit Planting Area along Skagit River

Skagit Bay Riparian Enhancement Project

Skagit Wildlife Area received

WWRP funds (State Lands Restoration) to improve habitat in conjunction with the Wiley Slough and Leque Island estuary restoration projects by removing invasive species and planting native



DeBay's Slough Unit Planting Area following blackberry control

woody vegetation around riparian and freshwater wetland areas.

Planting native scrub/shrub habitat provides a food source for insects, including native pollinators; provides structure/food for songbirds; provides insect and litter fall for fish; and naturally resists reinvasion by weeds. The grant was amended to transfer the funds from Leque Island to DeBay's Slough Unit when the Leque Island restoration project was placed on hold. The long-term goal is to develop a plan to improve access and provide seasonal trails.

Formalized plans need to be developed to create a schedule for

implementation and identify funding sources.

Agricultural Leases and Enhancements

On the Skagit Wildlife Area in 2011 approximately 1,120 acres of agriculture enhancements were provided through various agricultural agreements and wildlife area staff. Standing crops were provided on the primary hunting units on the Skagit WA: Johnson DeBay's Slough, South

Padilla Bay, Leque Island and Samish Units. Barley was planted on the Samish to provide winter forage for waterfowl and provided enhanced hunting opportunities.

Status Report of 2010-11 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 2012-13.

2010/11 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2012-13 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)	Approximately 500 acres of WDFW lands restored since 2000 (Milltown, Deepwater, Wiley Slough). Fir Island Farms Feasibility project in progress Leque Island north/south Cottonwood Slough?	Wiley Slough Restoration completed now in adaptive management planning stage.
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.	Feasibility completed on to the next of securing funding for 90% design.
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	Feasibility project in progress.
Implement, with Ducks Unlimited, the restoration of 115 acres on Leque Island to intertidal estuary	Original on hold until results from ground water study. Planning process to occur Fall 2012.	
Finalize, with Skagit River Systems Cooperative, the restoration design for Milltown Island and implement project (Skagit Bay Estuary)	Additional dike removal, channel development and vegetation work proposed	Vegetation maintenance and channel monitoring completed.
Develop a conceptual plan, with Ducks Unlimited, on the Island Unit to improve wetland management capabilities for waterfowl	Initiate data collection and discussions regarding fish passage and time of use issues. Funding requested thru a capital budget and Duck Stamp proposal to be revised.	No funding approved to date
Maintain 50 footbridges on Headquarters, Samish, Leque Island and Island Units	Work completed by volunteers Samish Unit.	
Secure wetland habitat in the English Boom, Port Susan, Skagit and Bay areas for protection, restoration and enhancement purposes as identified by the Pacific Coast Joint Venture Plan (Skagit Bay Estuary).	WDFW Land acquisition completed in South Padilla Bay. Livingston Bay acquisition completed by Whidbey Camano Land Trust.	No new acquisitions have been identified
Apply for grants to control weeds,	Grant funding received from RCO	RCO granted has been amended to

plant native vegetation, and use the WDFW Weed Crew	for planting on Headquarters and Leque Island Unit following restoration.	transfer planting area to DeBay's Slough along the river bank and slough.
Identify at least four areas where shorebird habitat exists and could 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
Evaluate proposal for odd/even hunting on the Samish Unit with the CAG and District Team.	Submitted to CAG received only positive comments.	No progress
Train and update existing stewardship groups for Johnson/DeBay Swan Reserve, Samish Unit, Camano Island Natural Area, Guemes Island and Island Unit.	Limited staff time available to move forward	
Determine, with Ducks Unlimited and drainage districts, the feasibility of improving water level management capabilities on Samish, Leque Island , and Island unit wetlands	Samish feasibility and summary draft report being completed by Ducks Unlimited. Leque Island Project delayed.	Full report not completed for Samish. Duck Stamp proposal for wetland enhancement design being moved forward for internal approval. Dikes failed and temporary repairs were installed on Leque Island proposed restoration project currently on hold.
Plant approximately 100 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) Island- 2011 and 2012(None) DeBay- 2011Corn and 2012 Potatoes hunt unit corn (9) remainder in winter wheat Leque- 2011 flooded 2012-(25) of barley Samish- Barley (215)	Continue as budget and field conditions allow
Continue to work with interested stakeholders to explore restoration and access options at Cottonwood Island	SRFB project being proposed to remove road way blocking Cottonwood Slough.	
Secure long-term lease to private moorage facility near Headquarters Unit , or move to public land	Long term lease secured. Facility will remain in current location.	Bank restoration project completed Summer 2011.
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		Preliminary proposals being developed to expanded non-hunting access for DeBay's Slough .

Samish Units , as necessary.		
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	Information gathered to examine potential private land leasing locations within North Snohomish and Skagit counties.	DNR site identified for the pheasant program in Skagit County for 2012 and 2013 seasons. .

New Strategies

No new strategies proposed as a part of this plan update.

2012 Performance Measures:

Performance measures for the Skagit Wildlife Area for 2012 are listed below. Accomplishments and progress toward desired outcomes will be monitored and evaluated annually.

- Update inventory of noxious weeds species and distribution on all units.
- Develop programs and funding strategies (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 grain cover crop for snow goose forage.
- 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.
- Work with WDOT and interested stakeholders in establishing fish passage at **Telegraph Slough** and Hwy. 20.
- Establish guidelines for building hunting blinds on the Skagit Wildlife Area.
- Coordinate with Habitat program during Phase 2 of the feasibility study of the **Fir Island Farms** Restoration Proposal.
- Coordinate with the WDFW Restoration Program Coordinator for the alternative analysis process for **Leque Island** Restoration Proposal.
- Provide agricultural enhancements on selected WDFW properties for wintering waterfowl forage.
- Manage the agricultural lease program to improve habitat and recreational benefit.
- Work with Skagit River System Cooperative to refine the adaptive management plan draft for **Wiley Slough** restoration project and other Skagit Wildlife Area restoration sites.
- Work with Wiley Working group to implement adaptive management measures indentified by the group.
- Assist with the implementation of capital projects such as the repair on the residence, demolition of unsafe structures and redevelopment of the **Headquarters'** Boat launch.
- Assist with the Wildlife Area planning process.
- Coordinate with the Puget Sound Partnership efforts to restore 2,682 acres of wetlands in the Skagit River delta (**Skagit Bay Estuary**).

Citizens Advisory Group Input

The Skagit Wildlife Area Citizen Advisory Group (CAG) Meeting was held on September 18, 2012. Those in attendance included: Rone Brewer, Gary Gibbs, Russ Link, Belinda Rotton, Greg Meis, Oscar Graham, Steve Aslanian, Martha Jordan, Dallas Wylie – Neighbor and hunter (provided comment prior to meeting)

Current Citizen Advisory Group members and their affiliation

Steve Aslanian	Skagit Audubon Society
Rone Brewer	Washington Waterfowl Association
Virginia Clark	Pilchuck Audubon Society
Edward Connor	Skagit Watershed Council
Curt Kraemer	Fish and Wildlife Advocate (retired fish biologist)
Oscar Graham	WDFW Waterfowl Advisory Committee
Gary Gibbs	Waterfowl Hunter
Steve Hinton	Skagit River System Cooperative
Martha Jordan	Trumpeter Swan Society
Art Kendall	WA Waterfowl Association (retired fish biologist)
Allen Rozema	Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland (executive director)
Allison Studley	Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group (executive director)
Albert Vincent, Jr.	Fish and Wildlife Committee for Persons with Disabilities
Sharon Swan	Fish/wildlife advocate (Snohomish County Parks & Recreation Department Planner)
Dallas Wylie	Neighbor, Farmer

The Island Unit

Gary Gibbs: How much money do we have and how is your budget put together?

Belinda could not provide exact numbers but explained that the wildlife area receives funds from state general revenue, state license sales, program income from agricultural leases and federal funds (Pittman Robertson Act – PR). These are allocated to cover salary, benefits, goods and services to include office expenses, utilities, vehicles, equipment purchases, and other supplies.

Large purchases like a barge would come from our operation and management budget or would require a special funding from combined sources such as State Duck Stamp, Wildlife Area funds and other funding sources. We would be able to use some lease money and money not spent on Island Unit farming for waterfowl enhancement projects. Large purchases need approval and the process can be difficult when acquiring used equipment, such as a used barge. There are bid processes and guidelines for these types of acquisitions.

Rone Brewer: WWA was involved in effort this year to find a barge for acquisition but was not able to find anything in time for this season. WWA is willing to assist in moving this process forward but needs assurance from the WDFW that the Island will be farmed for multiple years.

Belinda: The dikes will likely not be mowed this summer/fall since the tidal window to get out to the Island does not occur until November. The past two spring planting seasons have not been ideal condition on the Island unit. Wet spring and high river conditions combined with restricted transportation resulted in no agricultural enhancements being planted.

Estimates for cleaning ditches were requested from a local vendor. The rough estimates for cleaning the ditched around 20K with an additional 15K for equipment transport to and from the Island. A request for permit review has been submitted but what is required remains a question. It is possible that this may be an additional cost.

CAG: When can you provide a decision on whether or not money can get spent on the Island Unit?

Russell: suggested that the link for the weekly updates should be sent to the group so that they would be aware of the activities within the region and on the wildlife area.

http://wdfw.wa.gov/about/wildlife_weekly/

Gary Gibbs: Do we have funding for a barge?

We don't have money to rent a barge twice a year for the long-term.

It is a lot cheaper for a used barge, but the purchase of a used barge will need to be looked into.

Can WDFW accept a barge if it was given to them? The dimensions would likely need to be the same due to the size of the moorage.

Rone Brewer: It's been two years and WDFW doesn't have paperwork to get a barge!

How can Rone facilitate getting a barge? If we make an investment of a barge, we need to do a lot of work on the unit, including a new ditch and a long-term commitment to farming the unit. A new barge is a 20 year investment.

Without active beaver trapping there needs to be an excavator on the Unit year-around. There is a three foot culvert that has two ft of beaver debris in front of it. The culverts likely have not been cleaned out for 20 or more years.

If you end up doing new culverts, they need to be moved to the restored areas so they actually drain.

Rone will look into the potential to get some smaller commercial brush hogs over to the island to get the dikes mowed. A volunteer work party will be considered before the hunting season.

Belinda: We are coming into the next Duck Stamp cycle.

After the river level decreased and the fields began to dry out, WDFW have disked and cultipacked portions of fields that have been worked before and wetter areas that they could not enter earlier in the season. Where there is millet and smartweed growing, these areas were not disturbed.

Rone: Can we mow cattails in Seattle Ponds? Anything we can do to reclaim those fields would be very nice.

Dallas Wylie: Supports the acquisition of a new barge for the Island Unit. It is not possible to effectively implement an agricultural program on the Island without WDFW having easy access to transportation for equipment and supplies.

Rone Brewer: I would like WDFW to notify the PSNERP group that the Skagit CAG wants the Island Unit removed from their list of 5 projects on the Skagit Delta. The Commission made a choice with the Deepwater Slough project to support the current management of the Island. The long history of public use and access, plus the significant amount of funds past, present and future invested in the current management regime should indicate the Island Unit must be removed. If the WDFW continues to be committed to this project they should let PSNERP know.

Johnson DeBay Slough Swan Reserve

Martha Jordan provided a short summary of the DeBay Slough boundary dispute and the proposed watchable wildlife proposal that came from these meetings. A capital request was submitted but was not funded. It was requested that WA staff find this proposal and begin the process to find funding sources for the proposed ADA trail and viewing platform.

The proposal would allow the farm road around the field edge to be used as a trail by wildlife watchers.

The Swan signs need to be updated with new educational materials and the sign boards modified. Is it possible to keep the gate open in the winter? There was a steward that lived in the area that for many years was able to close and open the gate during the swan viewing season. We need to find people to monitor the site on the weekends if needed.

There is a small faction in the hunting community that wants to open the area for hunting and the answer is still “no.” Per the WAC, reserves do not allow hunting activity.

The DeBay’s hunt unit seems to have its own set of problems. There is a hunting blind in the blackberries that could be cut out. The DU ponds have filled in with alders. Why can’t we take the alders out?

Rone offered to come out and do a walk and talk with WDFW staff.

Will we need to get permits to renovate this site? **Belinda** will follow-up with the county to see if the renovation of these ponds is possible. Oscar Graham suggested that John Cooper would be the contact for the Critical Areas planning with Skagit County.

Belinda will contact Rone to set up a time to visit the hunt unit.

Can Martha get access to the gate? Yes there is currently a lock on the gate that she should be able to access the area.

Dallas Wylie provided comments prior to the meeting that he would like to see corn share cropped on the reserve portion of the property again to improve waterfowl hunting in the area and swan use.

Samish River Unit (Welts) Restoration

Belinda provided a handout of the conceptual design for Samish River Unit Restoration. We have a little flexibility with the design and hope to create some better waterfowl hunting opportunity on the site. It is a small area that does not make it possible to use for pheasant release program. The design creates channels that will hold water through most of the year and removes

tile drainage which will increase the water on site. These new channels will not be connected to the river or the estuary at this time but the design allows for the potential for the estuary restoration if desired at a later date.

The conservation easement held by the Natural Resources Conservation Service limits management capabilities on the property but allows for some management on a portion of this property.

The **CAG** is concerned about the planting plan and suggested that Bud Anderson be contacted regarding changes to habitat types. Bud would be able to provide input regarding raptor use of the site and will be concerned about people in close proximity to raptors. Tree planting is not so good for waterfowl or raptors. It is recommended that the trees not be planted. The disturbed areas need to be planted since the site has a lot of invasive species and it does need some help.

The **CAG** is also concerned that it will be a limited benefit to waterfowl hunting program in the long run if the site is planted to more woody vegetation around the channels.

This site may also be a good place to double up as a watchable wildlife site. How compatible is this with the birding community? There will be parking area added and additional mounds since the materials from the project will remain on site.

Steve Aslanian suggested adding elevated mounds near the parking area for views of the site for birders. These should have a gradual slope so that stairs will not be needed.

As the project moves forward there will be additional public process that will occur prior to next summer.

Bow Hill Road - New Pheasant Release Site

Brandon Roozen, a WDFW Biologist with the Private Lands Program is largely responsible for working with DNR to develop this new site. The property has approximately 70 acres of pasture area and different age timber harvest with additional harvests proposed to occur in the next few years. There is a pond area but it has limited waterfowl habitat. WDFW would need to consider long and hard before taking on this site long-term.

It was suggested that this may be a good place for a citizen science survey project to look at baseline presence for the site. It was also suggested that this might be a good watchable wildlife site.

Samish Unit

WDFW is working with Ducks Unlimited on a wetland enhancement project to create separate cells within the entire unit. During initial meetings with the dike district they had some concerns about the older proposal which had 3 foot dikes. The proposed design would allow more water depth to control vegetation and provide habitat. The dike district is concerned how these dikes might displace and redirect flood water potentially impacting neighboring properties.

Commissioner Sullivan recommendation is to have lower dikes, but that may not give WDFW enough water depth for the project. Ducks Unlimited is looking at the value of hydrologic models to predict potential changes at this scale. The most recent proposal is to lower the dike heights and create a flow through area. The dikes will be developed using materials from cleaning out the existing ditches. The project is scheduled to begin next summer.

Rone would like a copy of the plan when it is available? Belinda will send Rone a copy of the plan.

TNC found that cattails filled in after 3 years.

All the drainage will go into Alice Bay.

Oscar Graham: Waterfowl hunting Odd/Even Proposal - As you know I have long advocated measures to alleviate overcrowding by hunters during waterfowl season. The numbers of hunters at this location, particularly on weekends, diminishes the quality of the hunting experience and at times constitutes a hazard to public health and safety.

As a past member of the Waterfowl Advisory Group (WAG), I brought the proposal for an even/odd hunt on weekends to a vote and received unanimous support from the WAG. This vote is documented in WAG meeting minutes. Similarly the matter has been discussed at Citizen Advisory Group (CAG) meetings since the inception of the CAG and consistently received positive responses.

As noted in the Skagit Wildlife Area 2012 Management Plan Update under 2010/2011 Performance Measures; Evaluation of proposed odd/even hunting on the Samish Unit with the CAG and District Team was to occur during the update planning period. The status of the proposed measure was "Submitted to CAG received only positive comments". However, it was noted under Explanation of Progress that "No progress" had been made on the proposed measure. It is noteworthy that the odd/even proposal was the only performance measure noted to have made "no progress".

As the Samish unit transitions to moist soil management, perhaps the opportunity exists to evaluate hunter overcrowding and human management as well as the management of the land itself. A key management issue is overcrowding during waterfowl hunting season.

Gary Gibbs suggested considering limiting the number of parking stalls. What are your thoughts on first come first serve parking stalls? The group was not supportive of concept when parking area is filled there is no more hunting.

Rone Brewer suggested consideration of permanent blinds or hunting locations requiring hunters to stay within a given distance (100') of a designated post

Belinda noted that the Pheasant Release Site odd/even system only applies to the morning hours on weekends. My response to this comment was that such a system would go a long way towards alleviating the overcrowding problem in that weekend mornings are typically the times when overcrowding is the most extreme. Rone Brewer pointed out; limiting the number of hunters during the early morning may result in spreading the hunting opportunity out over the remainder of the day. Overall the group believes a reserve system is really a problematic and it would take more time and effort to manage.

Wiley Slough Adaptive Management Process

Belinda summarized for the CAG the activities of the Wiley Working Group and the current proposals for the dredging of Wiley Slough, development of an additional pump station, and repair of the tide gate infrastructure.

Rone: Will the funds to cover these additional costs like pumping were coming from the Wildlife Area budget?

Leque Island

Russ Link provided an update on the water quality study underway on Leque Island.

Priorities identified by the CAG from this meeting:

Develop a short and long-term plan with funding commitments for the Island Unit.

Develop the watchable wildlife proposal for DeBay's Slough Swan Reserve.

Develop an odd even hunting system for the Samish Unit for waterfowl hunting.

Contacts:

Belinda Rotton

Wildlife Area Manager

(360) 445-4441

WDFW Mill Creek Office

(425) 775-1311

Want to see the full plan?

Go to -

[http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/
management_plans/index.htm](http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/index.htm)