



# SKAGIT WILDLIFE AREA 2014 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/](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 2013-14 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies and performance measures for 2014-16.

## **Updates/Changes**

### **Cottonwood Island**

A restoration proposal has been submitted by the WDFW Habitat Program to the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO – 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.

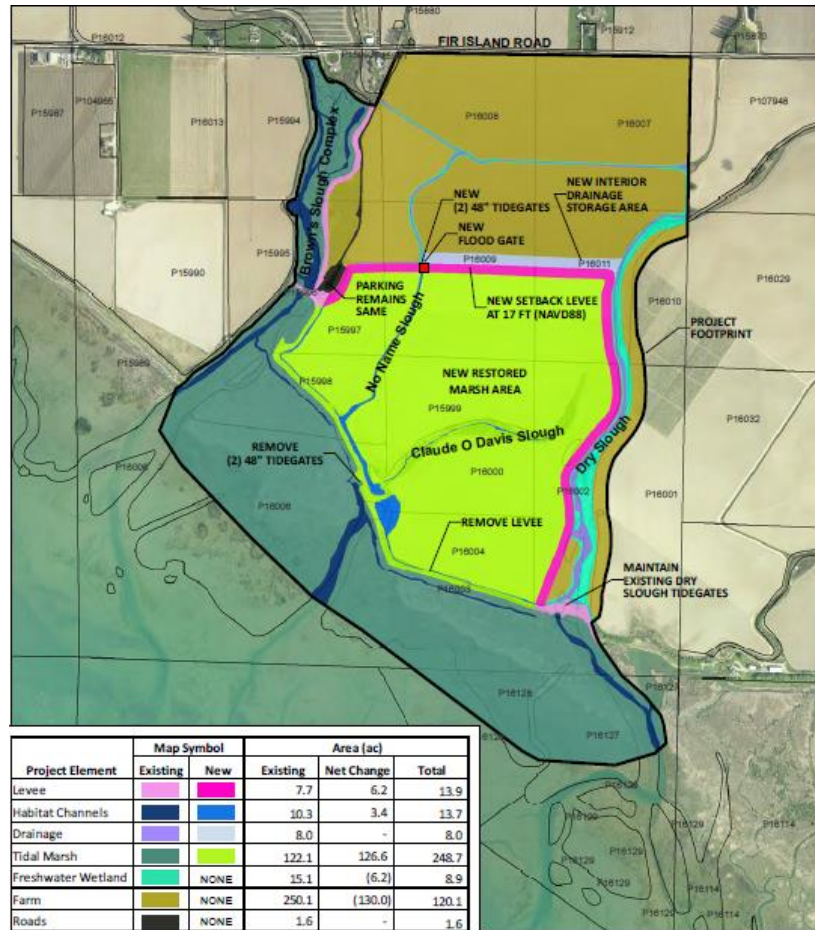
<b>Inside</b>	
<b>Land Management Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Updates/Changes</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Status Report of 2012 -13 Performance Measures</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>New Strategies</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2014 Performance Measures</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Wildlife Area Advisory Committee Input</b>	<b>13</b>

Additionally, work funded with this grant will complete a feasibility analysis of reconnecting the Cottonwood Slough side channel, which could potentially provide an even greater amount of tidal rearing area.

### Fir Island Farms/Snow Goose Reserve Restoration

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) owns 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 tidal connection, 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.

In 2009, funding was received from the Salmon Recovery Funding Board (SRFB) for a feasibility study on the Fir Island Farms property. The study examined 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. For more information about the feasibility study, go to [http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife\\_areas/skagit/restoration\\_study.php](http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/skagit/restoration_study.php)

Building on the Fir Island Farm Snow Goose Reserve Restoration Feasibility Study 2011, a comprehensive scope of work has been developed for the Fir Island Farm Final Design Project which will

be implemented in three sequential and inter-related phases over a 2 year period that began in January 2013. Funding to implement the Final Design Project has been secured. The Fir Island Farm Final Design Project will restore tidal flooding to approximately 126.6 acres of WDFW's preferred 130 acre project site by setting back approximately 5,800 lineal feet of existing coastal flood dike. The Final Design Project will be completed in December 2014. For more detailed information on the progress of the Fir Island Farms Restoration project visit [http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife\\_areas/skagit/final\\_restoration\\_study.php](http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/skagit/final_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 management program on the Island Unit comes with a full set of logistical, environmental and budgetary challenges that continue to evolve.

Historically, the management of the Island Unit has been focused on traditional values to provide forage for overwintering waterfowl and recreation opportunities. Last summer, a local stakeholder purchased a barge and has agreed to allow Wildlife Area staff to use the barge for the continued management of the agricultural program of the Island Unit. With this new barge and local volunteer support, Wildlife Area staff was able to plant approximately 60 acres of agricultural crops on the Island Unit in 2013. Other improvements that occurred during the 2013 season on the Island Unit include some drainage ditch maintenance work, the clearing of some trees on the dike prism and the mowing of dike tops and sides.

Currently, Wildlife Area staff are working to complete the drainage ditch maintenance during the summer 2014 and to determine if some of the field crossing culverts need to be cleaned and potentially replaced. Wildlife Area staff are monitoring the tidegates to determine if they are functioning properly. In addition, the staff is investigating what options are available to take corrective actions for repair or replacement of the tidegates.

For the 2014 planting season, Wildlife Area staff has created a planting plan that will potentially increase the acreage of agricultural crops on the Island Unit compared to last year. Planting will occur on small acreages as they become available and crops planted based on field conditions, location and length of growing season.

It is important to note that additional estuary restoration at the Island Unit has been identified as a high priority in the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan and the Puget Sound Nearshore Ecosystem Restoration Project. Although short-term management objectives for the Island Unit are focused on agriculture for waterfowl, it is likely that WDFW will come under increasing pressure to pursue additional estuary restoration work in the future.

### **Samish Unit**

The Samish Wetland Enhancement Project goals are to provide the ability to manage freshwater wetland habitat and agriculture on the 410 acres for the benefit of migratory birds, wetland dependent species and various raptor species. The Samish Unit is located within the lower Samish watershed, which is a highly modified landscape where much of the former estuary has been diked and drained for agricultural use.

Ducks Unlimited has partnered with WDFW to examine design options and constraints for this wetland enhancement project. The newest version of the project will include cleaning existing drainage ditches to a functional depth, placing water control structures in key locations to improve water level management (potential to hold and drain water throughout the year), creating swales and placing pipes with screw gates to connect some of the existing ponds directly to the drainage ditches.

The project is intended to provide improved water holding and drainage capability to facilitate wetland management (i.e. controlled drawdown or complete drainage for agricultural enhancements, etc.) and/or agricultural farming and create the ability to mimic the hydrology of historic seasonal wetlands in this watershed.

In addition, Wildlife Area staff is developing a user survey for the Samish Unit. The primary objective is to examine hunter use of the area. The Wildlife Area Advisory Committee will be asked to provide input on implementation and to identify other usable information.

### **Noxious Weed Control Program**

The goal of noxious weed control on Department lands is to maintain and improve habitat for wildlife, meet state legal obligations, provide good stewardship and protect adjacent private lands. To achieve these goals, WDFW uses integrated pest management (IPM). Integrated pest management is defined as a coordinated decision making action process that uses the most appropriate pest control methods and strategy in an environmentally and economically sound matter to meet agency programmatic pest management objectives to control noxious weeds.

For the year of 2013, Wildlife Area staff used the above protocol and identified noxious weed species of concern for each unit to control.

	DeBay's Slough	Leque Island	Headquarters	Samish	Island & Skagit Bay
Species					
Blackberry sp.	X	X	X		
Bull Thistle		X		X	
Canada Thistle	X	X	X	X	
Cattails			X	X	X
Red Alder			X		
Reed Canary Grass	X	X		X	X
Purple Loosestrife			X		X
Poison Hemlock		X	X	X	
Yellow Flag Iris			X		X

Wildlife Area Units treated using IPM in total acres for 2013.

	Samish	Leque	Debay's Slough	Headquarters
Mowing	90.2 acres	56.1 acres	4 acres	5.3 acres
Spraying	53.2 acres	49.1 acres	1.5 acres	.5 acres

The total acreage treated using IPM on wildlife area units in 2013 is (Mowing=163.5 acres, Spraying=104.3) 267.8 acres. Wildlife Area staff have been observing some positive outcomes with treatments of noxious weeds and the increased quality of habitat post treatment. Treatment areas will be monitored and treated as needed in 2014.

### **Skagit Bay Estuary Invasive Cattail Management Project**

Lesser cattail (*Typha angustifolia*) and hybrid cattail (*T. x glauca*) are non-native, invasive emergent plants that have colonized approximately 650 acres near the mouth of the South Fork of the Skagit River on the Skagit Wildlife Area. Invasive cattail has been listed as a C-Class weed by the Washington State Noxious Weed Board in 2014. These changes to vegetation by monocultures of cattails and the associated invertebrate assemblages potentially impact other fish and wildlife species such as salmonids and waterfowl.

This project will target up to 65 acres over a two year time frame starting in June 2014. The project will use a predictive vegetation model to identify treatment areas with the highest probability of success (where native species are most likely to recolonize) and implement a vegetation sampling plan to determine the efficacy of invasive cattail management and re-colonization/establishment of native vegetation.

Three treatment methods will be used to treat up to 65 acres of invasive cattail including cutting, crushing and herbicide application. These methods may be used alone, or in combination to achieve the goals of reducing invasive cattail abundance at treatment sites and are consistent with integrated pest management

(IPM) principles. Pre and post treatment sampling of the treatment areas and subsequent analysis will occur to determine the efficacy of cattail control and native plant colonization/establishment.

The desired outcome is to determine if a larger scale long-term cycle of management can be used to develop and maintain native marsh habitat in areas that have been colonized post restoration by non-native cattail. Grant funding has been received from Department of Ecology to examine larger scale vegetation control in tidal marsh areas along with the effectiveness of control and ability of native vegetation to colonize the treated sites.

### **Leque Island Alternatives Analysis and Design Project**

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) own all of Leque Island, except for road right-of-ways controlled by Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and Snohomish County. The portion of the island south of Highway 532 is approximately 250 acres within the dikes and is currently isolated from tidal inundation with perimeter dikes built in the early 1900's. The perimeter dikes are in a state of disrepair, and high tides combined with storm events have caused the dikes to be breached multiple times; most recently in 2010. The breached sections of dike have been temporarily repaired. These temporary repairs were costly to construct and were implemented with permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers that require their removal as soon as a long-term solution to the failing dikes is adopted or in May of 2016 if a solution is not identified and a permit extension cannot be secured.

WDFW and Ducks Unlimited (DU) have acquired grant funding to conduct an alternatives analysis and design project to examine potential solutions to the failing dikes. The objective of the proposed Leque Island Alternatives Analysis and Design Project is to develop and examine potential design options for Leque Island, select the preferred alternative design, and to advance the preferred alternative design to permit-level stage.

WDFW and DU will draft multiple conceptual designs, use models to predict effects of each design, analyze merits and drawbacks of each design, and solicit input from stakeholders and Tribes to assist with WDFW's selection of the preferred design alternative. WDFW will host at least two public meetings to disseminate information regarding this project, and will convene a project stakeholder committee consisting of representatives from various groups and organizations that will more closely examine project issues as they arise. As of April 30, 2014, WDFW has held one public meeting and two Stakeholder Committee meetings regarding this project.

As project reports and materials are generated, they will be posted on this webpage. For more information or to track the project developments go to

[http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife\\_areas/skagit/leque\\_island\\_project.php](http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/skagit/leque_island_project.php)

### **Samish River Unit**

Natural Resources Conservation Service (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 specific objectives of the Samish River Unit are to create a diversity of wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities with the potential for future enhancement including the opportunity to connect to the river or estuary. WDFW has prepared a State Lands Development grant through RCO to provide public access on the site for the 2014 grant cycle.

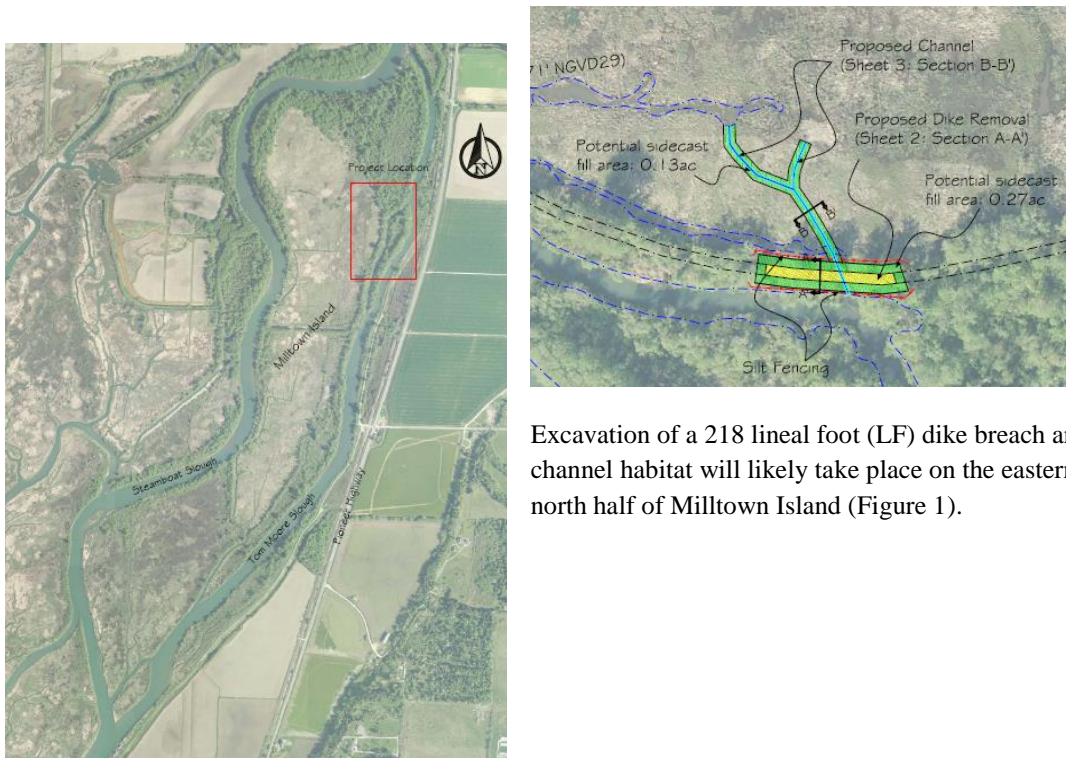
## Milltown Island - Summary of Restoration, Planting, Maintenance and Monitoring Activities

(Summary based on information provided by Eric Mickelson from Skagit River System Cooperative)

### Dike Breaching/Channel Excavation

A final round of dike breaches and channel excavations using explosives was planned for the summer of 2012, but changes to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Nationwide Permit guidelines required the project to be re-verified through the permit process before excavation could proceed. This process took much longer than anticipated, but was finally completed in 2013, clearing the project for excavation, scheduled to now take place in the summer of 2014.

**Figure 1.** Proposed dike breach/channels on Milltown Island



Excavation of a 218 lineal foot (LF) dike breach and 446 LF of channel habitat will likely take place on the eastern edge of the north half of Milltown Island (Figure 1).

### Vegetation Planting and Maintenance

In the winter of 2012, Pacific willow, hooker willow, sitka willow and Scouler's willow were planted at the cross dike blast site (Figure 2). Narrow-leaved cattail (*Typha angustifolia*) (1.3 acres) were mowed and 0.04-acres of yellow flag (*Iris pseudacorus*) were dug-up in the summer of 2012. Narrow-leaved cattail competes with native wetland species and is on the Washington State Noxious Weed Monitor List.

### Monitoring

Vegetation establishment and channel development were monitored by Skagit River System Cooperative at the site from 2006-13, and are being compared to other WDFW-owned South Fork Skagit River delta restoration sites (Wiley Slough and Deepwater Slough) as well as to nearby reference marshes. Monitoring data are still being analyzed, but it is apparent that channels and vegetation throughout the site continue to adjust to site hydrology.

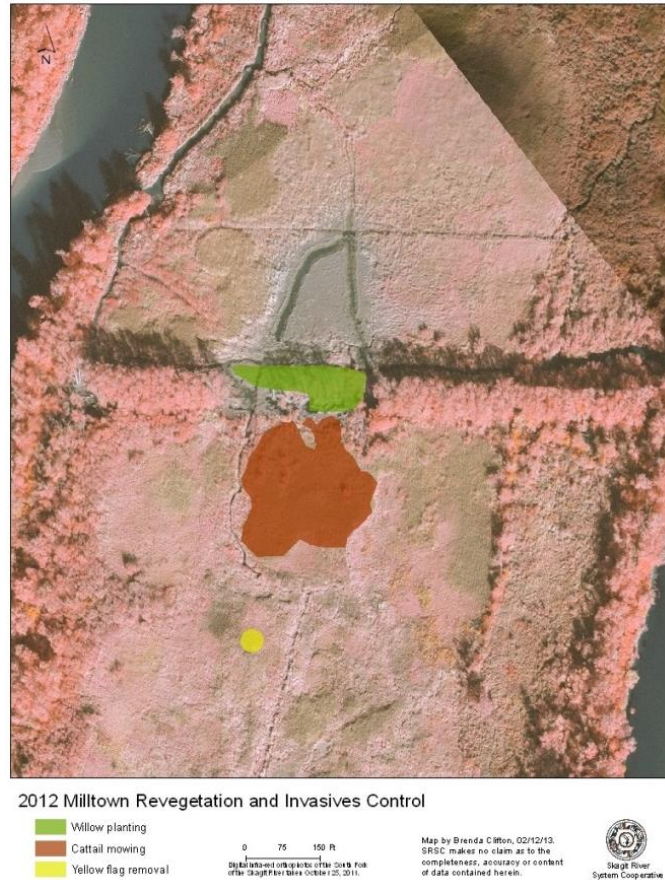
### Channels

Generally, channels excavated through the perimeter of the dike have maintained or increased their size over time, while those excavated through marsh surfaces in the interior of the site have decreased in size over time. This may indicate that more or larger breaches through the outer dike may be necessary to provide adequate hydrology to maintain the interior marsh channels. However, the interior marshes at the site are subsided from a long history of being cut off from tidal and riverine inundation, so they currently undergo longer periods of sheet flow and shorter periods of in-channel flow than do undiked reference marshes.

With the restoration of riverine and tidal processes to the site, natural sedimentation on marsh surfaces may lead to longer periods of in-channel flow over time, which would lead to higher flow velocities within the channels and thus lower rates of sedimentation within the channels. The channels at Milltown Island represent an interesting contrast to the Wiley Slough and Deepwater Slough restoration sites, where full dike removal was employed rather than selective dike breaching.

### Vegetation

Milltown Island appears to be in a state of transition between the pre-project state and that of nearby reference marshes. The Milltown project area is dominated by reed canary grass, while the reference marshes are dominated by sweet gale and Lyngbye's sedge. Species diversity and richness are lower in the project area than in the reference marshes. This is a reflection of the pre-project condition where soil disturbance and the inhibition of tidal inundation by the dike system favored reed canary grass colonization over other plants. It is projected that the restoration of tidal and riverine flooding to the historic marsh surface will result in a transition towards the historic condition of the site, contributing to improvements in the quantity and quality of estuarine habitat. However, established stands of reed canary grass are persisting. This may be due to the competitive edge of pre-project establishment. It is also possible that dispersal limitation, exotic colonists, and subsequent disturbance, may lead to differences between restored biota and those in reference wetlands.



**Figure 2.** Invasive species control and native plant installation areas.



## Agricultural Leases and Enhancements

On the Skagit Wildlife Area in 2012-13, approximately 1,120 acres of agriculture enhancements were provided through various agricultural agreements and the work of volunteers and Wildlife Area staff. Standing crops were provided on the primary hunting units on the Skagit Wildlife Area including: Johnson DeBay's Slough, Leque Island, Island, Samish Units, and South Padilla Bay. Barley and corn were planted on the Samish Unit in 2013 to provide winter forage for waterfowl and provide enhanced hunting opportunities.

### Status Report of 2012-13 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 2014.

2012/13 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2014 Related Activity/ Comments
Update inventory of noxious weeds species and distribution on all units.	WA staff and North Sound Weed Crew continue to improve inventory.	Priority areas are being treated. New treatment sites are added as time and funding allow.
Coordinate with the Puget Sound Partnership efforts to restore 2,682 acres of wetlands in the Skagit River delta ( <b>Skagit Bay Estuary</b> )	Approximately 500 acres of WDFW lands restored or enhanced since 2000 include <b>Milltown, Deepwater,</b> (see below) and <b>Wiley Slough.</b>	<b>Wiley Slough</b> Restoration completed now in adaptive management stage.  <b>Fir Island Farms</b> Final Design Phase in progress <b>Cottonwood Island</b> feasibility study in progress.
Explore tidal marsh restoration alternatives at Dry Slough on the <b>Fir Island Farms/Hayton Reserve.</b>	Design funding secured.	Final design expected December 2014. Construction funding being requested.
Evaluate with District Team and WAAC, proposed riparian habitat designs on <b>Fir Island Farms/ Hayton Reserve.</b>	Will be completed as part of the feasibility and design study	Feasibility project in progress.
<b>Finalize, with Skagit River Systems Cooperative, the restoration design for Milltown Island and implement project (Skagit Bay Estuary)</b>	<b>Additional dike removal, channel development and vegetation work proposed</b>	<b>Proposal summary provided above</b>
Implement, with Ducks Unlimited, the restoration of 115 acres on <b>Leque Island</b> to intertidal estuary.	<b>Leque Island North</b> became intertidal by dike, culvert, and tide gate failure.	<b>Leque Island South</b> feasibility is being examined in the Alternatives Analysis and Design Project.
Develop a conceptual plan, with Ducks Unlimited, on the <b>Island Unit</b> to improve wetland management capabilities for waterfowl	Initiate data collection and discussions regarding fish passage and time of use issues.	Priority level of wetland enhancement lowered due to failing tidegate need for repair.

2012/13 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2014 Related Activity/ Comments
Apply for grants to control weeds, plant native vegetation, and use the WDFW Weed Crew	Maintenance of plantings continues on <b>Headquarters</b> site and portions of <b>DeBay's Slough</b> .  Request funding to examine the feasibility of large scale cattail control in the intertidal marsh.	Grant funding received from DOE to develop cattail control methods for intertidal areas.
Educate hunters and enforce the 15-shell limit, with enforcement officers, on the <b>Samish</b> and <b>Island units</b> to provide quality and increased hunting opportunities.	Working with WDFW enforcement staff to introduce new officers to these locations	Proposal has been suggested to include <b>DeBay's Slough</b> hunt unit in the 15 shell limit.
Develop programs and funding strategies (WDFW staff, Wildlife Area Advisory Group and others) to successfully buy/lease land for recreational purposes.	Work with the WAAC and WDFW Private Lands Program to find potential locations for recreational access.	Have private lands program provide desired site criteria to WAAC.
Train and update existing stewardship groups for <b>Johnson/DeBay's Swan Reserve, Samish Unit, Camano Island Natural Area, Guemes Island and Island Unit</b> .		Work with new regional volunteer coordinator to identify projects and activities for volunteers. Prioritize sites for potential stewardship groups.
Determine, with Ducks Unlimited and drainage districts, the feasibility of improving water management capabilities on <b>Samish, Leque Island, and Island Unit</b> wetlands.	Samish feasibility and summary draft report being completed by Ducks Unlimited.  Leque Island Alternatives Analysis process is currently underway.  Island Unit ditch and culvert maintenance work is being completed.	Wetland enhancement proposal should begin public process in spring 2014.
Evaluate proposal for odd/even hunting on the <b>Samish Unit</b> with the WAAC and District Team.	Submitted to WAAC received only positive comments.	Local enforcement concerns with implementation have resulted in a modified approach. New approach needs more site user education and feedback.
Establish guidelines for building hunting blinds on the Skagit Wildlife Area.	No progress at this time.	WDFW is coordinating with Washington Waterfowl Association work parties on the installation of hunting blinds.
Inventory newly acquired <b>Bald Eagle Natural Area</b> properties transferred from the Department of Natural Resources.	Limited progress on this item.	Workload limited, dealing with issues on a case by case basis.
Plant up to 610 acres of <b>Fir Island Farms/ Hayton Reserve</b> in cereal grain cover crop for snow goose forage.	Improve lease compliance with lessee and update the available acreage amounts on the Hayton property.	Amendment to lease negotiated and compliance issues identified.

2012/13 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/ 2014 Related Activity/ Comments
Work with WDOT and interested stakeholders in establishing fish passage at <b>Telegraph Slough</b> and Hwy 20.		Currently identified as a Puget Sound Near Shore Ecosystem Restoration project. No project funding exists.
Continue to work with interested stakeholders to explore restoration and access options at <b>Cottonwood Island</b>	SRFB project being proposed to remove road way blocking Cottonwood Slough.	Cottonwood Island feasibility study is currently underway.
Begin the Watchable Wildlife subcommittee process present and recommendation to the District Team and WAAC for review of the watchable wildlife enhancements on <b>Johnson DeBay's Slough Swan Reserve, Fir Island Farms/ Hayton Snow Goose Reserve, Headquarters Restoration and Samish Units</b> , as necessary.		Preliminary proposals being developed to expanded non-hunting access for <b>DeBay's Slough</b> . Begin discussion with the WAAC.
Develop and evaluate (with Wildlife Area Advisory Committee, 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 2012-2014 seasons.  Review of potential properties has been completed by Regional Private Lands staff.
Coordinate with Habitat Program during Phase 2 of the feasibility study of the <b>Fir Island Farms Restoration Proposal</b> .		WA Manager participates on technical review committee.
Coordinate with the WDFW Restoration Program Coordinator for the alternative analysis process for <b>Leque Island Restoration Proposal</b> .		WA Manager participates in the stakeholder committee process and provides technical information for the modeling process.
Assist with the Wildlife Area planning process.		WA Manager provided input to Olympia planning staff on the new planning process for Wildlife Areas.
Work with Skagit River System Cooperative to refine the adaptive management plan draft for <b>Wiley Slough</b> restoration project and other Skagit Wildlife Area restoration sites.		SRSC provided draft of the Adaptive Management Plan. The project monitors features related to fish access, habitat development and vegetation monitoring.
Manage the agricultural lease program to improve habitat and recreational benefit.	Island 2012: None 2013: Corn 40 ac. Barley 2 ac. Millet 12ac. DeBay's 2012: Potatoes Hunt unit corn 9 ac. Plus winter wheat 2013: Alfalfa 40 ac.	

	<p>Corn 85 ac.  Barley 15ac.  Leque 2012: Barley 25ac.  2013: Corn 8ac.  Barley 43ac.  Samish 2012: Barley 215 ac.  2013: Barley 180 ac.  Corn 30 ac.</p>	
<p>Work with Wiley Work Group to implement adaptive management measures identified by the group for the Wiley Slough Restoration project.</p>		<p>WDFW is working with the Wiley Work Group to implement a pump station installation and repair of tide gate and culvert infrastructure.</p>
<p>Assist with the implementation of capital projects such as the repair on the residence, demolition of unsafe structures and redevelopment of the <b>Headquarters'</b> Boat launch.</p>		<p>Rotted stairs repaired on the residence.</p> <p>Molberg house was demolished.</p> <p>Capital projects submitted for residence repair, shop repair and expansion, spur dike repair, island tide gate repair, flap gate and pipe for Wylie ditch, and Samish River access parking lot.</p>
<p>Coordinate with the Puget Sound Partnership efforts to restore 2,682 acres of wetlands in the Skagit River delta (<b>Skagit Bay Estuary</b>)</p>		<p>WA staff continues to coordinate with WDFW staff and the restoration community on these issues.</p>

**New Strategies**

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

**2014 Performance Measures:**

Performance measures for the Skagit Wildlife Area for 2014 are listed below. Accomplishments and progress toward desired outcomes will be monitored and evaluated annually.

Implement Samish River Unit Wetland Enhancement.

Implement Samish Unit Wetland Enhancement.

Continue to coordinate with on the Fir Island Farms Restoration Project Work Group.

Continue to work with the Wiley Work Group on adaptive management projects.

Implement Cattail Control Project.

Implement Weed Management Program.

Coordinate with WAAC on the DeBay's Slough public access proposal.



Coordinate with SRSC on the Milltown Island channel enhancement work.

Manage the agricultural lease program to improve habitat and recreational benefit.

Coordinate with WAAC on the Samish Unit User Survey

Implement Wiley Slough pump station installation.

Coordinate with WAAC on the development of maps and information signage on WA units.

Complete ditch maintenance work on Island Unit and Wiley Slough.

Coordinate with Capital Asset Management Program on the Wiley Slough Boat launch repair project.

Work with WAAC and volunteers to identify photo monitoring point locations for restoration project and ecological integrity monitoring.

Continue to participate as a part of Regional District Team to guide the Leque Island Alternative Analysis and Design Project.

Continue to participate in Regional District Team to address issues related to the Skagit Wildlife Area lands.

### **Wildlife Area Advisory Committee Input**

The Skagit Wildlife Area Wildlife Area Advisory Committee (WAAC) meeting was held on April 29, 2014. Those in attendance included:

- Steve Aslanian, Skagit Audubon Society
- Curt Kraemer, Fish and wildlife advocate
- Gary Gibbs, Waterfowl hunter
- Steve Hinton, Skagit River System Cooperative

Comments provided by Art Kendall, Washington Waterfowl Association; Martha Jordan, Trumpeter Swan Society; and Dallas Wylie, neighbor/farmer.

### **Restoration Pathway**

WAAC members wanted WDFW staff to be more transparent, disseminate information widely (make it easy to get, follow and provide frequent updates), if possible. Provide public comment periods in all areas of the restoration alternative process.

*Weekly reports provide all the information that our Wildlife Program Manager, Restoration Project Coordinator and Wildlife Area staff has regarding projects in the region.*

*The Science and Lands Divisions are working together to develop spatially-enabled maps of our Wildlife Areas. The goal is to have the users be able to click on a unit and get up to-date information on that unit.*

#### **Identify WAAC projects of interest and items of concern for 2014**

##### **Complete ditch maintenance work on Island Unit and Wiley Slough**

WAAC members voiced concerns about the use of private equipment without some sort of formal agreement to protect the agency from liability. The group also requested that the agency should try to negotiate some longer-term agreement to provide some reliability of management for the Island Unit.

*WDFW staff agreed and suggested that a no cost contract may be the mechanism. Staff will contact the contracts offices to determine best course of action.*

##### **Implement Samish River Unit Wetland Enhancement**

Members asked if there would still be two blinds on unit after the enhancement project is completed.

*WDFW response is there will likely be two hunting blinds located on the site after the project is completed, however, the locations of the blinds may change.*

##### **Implement Samish Unit Wetland Enhancement**

No comments were made specifically about the wetland enhancement project. The group was informed that the public review process will begin very soon.

Members had a number of questions about WDFW response to Samish overcrowding issues that occur on the site during hunting season primarily on weekends. A proposal was submitted to consider an odd even controlled access similar to that used for pheasant hunting. After further discussion with the regional Enforcement staff, there were concerns about the staff time to effectively enforce such a program. Even with strong support from the wildlife area advisory committee other methods to improve use of the site and hunting access are being considered to include additional hunting blinds, distribution of agricultural forage and improved signage. It is important to note that no complaints were received related to over-crowding this year.

A number of ideas have been suggested to control the issues. Proposals include reserved blinds, blind only hunting with a limited number, limited designated hunt areas, and expanding the parking area.

*We are listening to the concerns about over-crowding. However we believe that an important role of the Samish Unit is to provide access and opportunity to the public for hunting and wildlife viewing. Many of the proposals restrict usage, access, opportunity, and involve dedicated law enforcement personnel to facilitate this management shift. Staff has begun to implement a strategy of incorporating more blinds to the site, spread the agricultural acreage to be located throughout the property to maximize the hunt ability of the unit. WLA staff has been working*

*with Ducks Unlimited on a wetland enhancement project that will allow some flexibility in habitat/agricultural management in the near future. WLA staff is working with Washington Waterfowl to implement a User Registration Card for us to get more detailed information on the use that occurs on this unit throughout the year and this information will be utilized to assist us with overcrowding issues at this unit. Parking lot expansion is not being considered at this time.*

### **Wiley Slough Boat launch repair project**

Questions from WAAC included the following: timing, boat launch steepness, location, barge disposal and cleaning out the boat launch. The project is slated to begin in 2015, which includes ramp replacement, and dredging. WLA staff has been working with DNR personnel to have the old barge dismantled and disposed of later this summer. During this project, WLA staff may need to restrict the public from using the boat launch and boat launch parking lot.

### **Fir Island Farms Restoration project**

Skagit Wildlife Area Manager has been attending meetings related to the technical aspects of the restoration project. No changes to public access or the reserve status have been discussed at this time.

WAAC Members: Fir Island Farm restoration is focused on the desire to consider improved public access. Specific question include: increased public access to the newly constructed dikes, status of the game reserve, the loss of lease rental funding and hunting access.

*More input and discussion from the committee about public access desires is welcome for the Fir Island Farms Unit. Please let me know if you are interested in this issue.*

### **Wiley Work Group adaptive management**

The Wiley Work Group includes representatives from WDFW Regional Wildlife and Habitat programs, Capital Asset Management, Skagit River Systems Cooperative, Dike District #22, Estuary and Salmon Restoration Program, NOAA Fisheries, and U.S Fish and Wildlife Service. This group was tasked to identify adaptive management guidelines and develop solutions to the identified drainage issues following the implementation of the Wiley Slough Restoration project. Identified projects include development of a new pump station and repair of existing tide gates.

### **Implement Wiley Slough Pump Station installation.**

WAAC members have questions related to the location of the pump station. There was concern about the lack of public involvement and review in this project. There is concern current location will impact the public during and post construction. There is concern about water quality discharges into the restoration site.

*The location of the new pump station was selected as a part of a group process focused on addressing the potential short and long-term drainage issues associated with the Wylie Slough Restoration project. This site was selected for the following reason:*

- *to effect drainage in the portion of the system most impacted*
- *to be far enough away from the tide gates that fish screens are not required*

- *to provide access to power and ability to maintain.*
- *to be located near the tide gate system*

*Recreational public involvement in the Wiley Work Group process was not an initial consideration due to the technical nature of the issues and the focus on project specific issues. I will review this project and WAAC concerns with Wildlife Program Manager Russell Link for guidance on future project expectations.*

### **Comments provided about WDFW communication with the public**

WAAC members are in favor of a request to WDFW to add on the statewide website a special area that will give a monthly update on progress on all restoration projects past, present, and future. To include but not limited to:

1. Public meeting
2. General scope and costs involved
3. Timeline of the projects
4. Provide means for public input

The members would like WDFW to be more open and transparent in providing information to the public about projects and other activities of the agency to include committees such as Flood, Farm and Fish Initiative also known locally as the “Three FI”.

They would like to have feedback responded to directly.

*Russell Link, the Regional Wildlife Program Manager would like to remind and encourage the WAAC members that they can be added to the weekly report list and are welcome to be on the master email list of each project for updates and information.*

**Items below were not discussed in the meeting but WAAC members requested more information related to these items. A brief summary is provided below.**

#### **Implement Cat-tail Control Project**

*Wildlife Area staff, WDFW weed crew, Habitat program staff and Greg Hood from Skagit River Systems Cooperative have been working on a proposal to control cat-tail in the Skagit Bay Estuary. We will be working with Greg Hood to select treatment areas based on a number of criteria to include elevation, timing and duration of tidal flooding within and near estuary restoration projects. Treatment is slated to begin late summer to early fall. Please contact me if you would like to give us feedback or have questions regarding this project.*

#### **Implement Weed Management Program**

*Summary included in the plan update. Please contact me if you would like to give us feedback or have questions regarding this project.*

#### **Coordinate with WAAC on the DeBay’s Slough Public Access proposal**

*I would like to discuss with the WAAC a previously submitted capital proposal to increase public access and viewing features on the DeBay’s Slough Reserve site. The proposal has not been*



*funded but there are features that could be completed with minimal funding. However, I would like to carefully consider with the committee how this proposal may impact the management of the game reserve.*

*Please contact me if you would like to give us feedback or have questions regarding this project.*

**Coordinate with SRSC on the Milltown Island channel enhancement work**

*Summary included in the plan update.*

*Please contact me if you would like to give us feedback or have questions regarding this project.*

**Manage the agricultural lease program to improve habitat and recreational benefits**

*Summary provided at the meeting and in email to members not in attendance.*

**Coordinate with WAAC on the Samish Unit User Survey**

*The objective of the user survey cards is to develop a mechanism to gather information about site use and success for the chosen activity. We would like to discuss with the WAAC if this is a survey that would be useful beyond the hunting season and what other sorts of data might be beneficial to request. A copy of the survey form and reports are provided. Please contact me if you would like to give us feedback or have questions regarding this project.*

**Coordinate with WAAC, on the development of maps and information signage on WA units**

*Wildlife Area staff are planning to develop maps and informational signage for certain WA units. We would like ideas and feedback on items to consider including on the signs. We will begin developing some base level products for late summer to fall. Please contact me if you would like to give us feedback or have questions regarding this project.*

**Work with WAAC and volunteers to identify photo monitoring point locations for restoration project and ecological integrity monitoring**

*The objective is to identify locations where photo monitoring points can be used to monitor restoration project evolution or monitor the changes in the estuary. Photo points have been set up for the Wiley Slough restoration project. Assistance with marking these locations and identifying other locations on the wildlife area is still needed. If you know individuals that may have historic photos of the site this would also be very useful. The thought is that in the long-term volunteers and citizen scientists will be able to visit these locations and upload photos of the points. Please contact me if you would like to give us feedback or have questions regarding this project.*

**Next steps and wrap up**

The committee requested that more detailed information on the items not covered. The group requested that move forward concerns about the communication issue. An important point to keep in mind we are interested in protecting and improving the Wildlife Area, the WAAC would like to be considered more a part of the process of supporting WA efforts but they need to be more informed in order to be able to perform this role.

## **Comments provided from WAAC members as a follow-up to notes.**

### **Art Kendell**

From email dated June 2, 2014

You did a good job of summarizing our meeting. I hope we can see some of the increases in communication that we asked for. On the document for activities on the units for 2014, it really looks good. Given some decent weather we should have a good waterfowl season. Just a couple of things: Maybe add "maintain driving surfaces" at HQ and Fir Island Farm units. Also, there are 3 hunting blinds at the Padilla Bay Unit, the document says 2. Also, could you do some cat-tail control in front of the blinds at HQ to provide a landing zone for ducks? Additionally, I would like to see an observation blind built along the main trail at HQ near "Wiley Lake".

Debay Slough Proposal:

Wildlife viewing opportunities have not been lost due to restoration projects. In fact wildlife viewing might have improved at HQ. Viewers can see more waterfowl from the dike trails now than before. I would much rather see hunting opportunities improved at DeBay's Slough. Seriously consider using the site as a pheasant release area Sept-Nov, before the swans arrive. Re-establish the ponds that DU dug for duck resting.

### **Martha Jordon**

From email dated June 4, 2014

My biggest concerns relate to the chronic shift to restoration landscape management without looking at the bigger picture of the impacts of actions related to this view. Also, as you are aware, there is a loss of institutional memory in WDFW related to many areas, including Skagit Wildlife Area properties.

The Johnson-DeBay Swan Reserve area was created through Federal grants and supported by many local groups to be exactly what it is today-- a Reserve for swans and many other species of wildlife. Given the significant loss of waterfowl friendly cropping in Whatcom, Skagit and moving into Snohomish counties, the Reserve property becomes ever more important for conservation for waterfowl friendly farming. In addition to swans, the JDSR serves as habitat for a wide variety of birds and mammals.

Keeping this area in Reserve status is vital to continuing the commitment made not only to wildlife but to the community who have given time and money to keep it going.

Working to make this a better place for people to come and spend time needs to be the goal. I strongly oppose any efforts to open JDSR to any type of hunting at any time.

I strongly support rehabilitation of the adjacent hunt area.

As you are aware, the proposal for adding the birding trail, and other watchable wildlife features at JDSR has been ongoing since 2009 and before. This document and other proposals have been brought up at the WAAC before and have received support. The fact that some members of our group want to see hunting as a bargaining chip in order for their support for non-hunting activities is unfortunate. The area is a Reserve at this time. The support to change this is far outweighed by those who do not support a status change.

I agree that communication is an issue within WDFW.

Please let me know who I need to communicate with regarding being put on notice lists for status updates and weekly reports. As I recall, the weekly reports are on line. Does WDFW have an e-mail list to send reminders to check it? Does your weekly report get posted somewhere we can view it?

Martha Jordan

**Dallas Wylie** (Personal communication provided before the meeting)

- Supports the installation of the pump station on Wiley Slough and the repair of the tide gates on Wiley Slough
- Supports cleaning the ditches on the Island Unit and believes the culverts and tide gates also need to be repaired.
- Supports corn being included on the rotation of crops on the DeBay's Slough Swan Reserve because he believes the corn provides more late winter forage resources for the birds and it holds birds in the reserve. Supports improved access to the DeBay's Slough site.

**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)