



# L.T. MURRAY WILDLIFE AREA 2017 MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

## **Land Management Summary**

This is an update to the 2006 L.T. Murray Wildlife Area Management Plan [http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife\\_areas/management\\_plans/](http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/), which provides management direction for the roughly 120,000-acre wildlife area complex located near Ellensburg, in Kittitas County, Washington. The plan identifies needs and guides activities on the area based on the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Mission statement “*Preserve, protect and perpetuate fish, wildlife and ecosystems while providing sustainable fish and wildlife recreational and commercial opportunities*” and its underlying statewide goals and objectives as they apply to local conditions.



Plans are updated every two years 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.

## **UPDATES / CHANGES**

### **New Wildlife Area Staff**

Natural Resource Technician 2, Craig Schnebly, left the department in March 2015 and his replacement, Marcus Leuck, was hired in July 2015. Melissa Babik stepped in as the new LT Murray Wildlife Area Manager in August 2016 after Shana Winegeart left the agency in May 2016. Wayne Hunt, the Assistant Manager, retired in September 2016. Noel Winegeart was hired to replace him in November 2016.

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## **Hunting**

*Pheasant:* Roughly 350 pheasants were released annually in the Green Gate unit of the Quilomene Wildlife Area.

*Mule Deer:* WDFW in partnership with the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe continues to monitor mule deer population dynamics in the East Slope Cascades and the Naches Mule Deer Management Zones (MDMZ). Buck to doe ratio in both MDMZs (15-19:100) was met in 2016. The East Slope Cascades mule deer estimate in 2016 was approximately 3,700 animals in District 8. Survey data indicate stable to increasing East Slope Cascade population growth overall in the zone. In 2016, the Naches MDMZ population estimates were roughly 4,300 animals; however, this estimate was potentially low due to migration during the survey. Mule deer populations in the Naches MDMZ are low compared to historic levels. Disease, environmental factors, and heavy predation are potentially affecting fawn and adult survival.



Releasing pheasants in the Green Gate unit.

*Big Horn Sheep:* Adult ewe counts had been declining and reached lows in 2014 after the 80,000 acre Colockum-Tarps Fire. Lamb recruitment has been fairly low. The Quilomene Sheep Herd is at its objective of 150-170 animals, with a total herd count in 2016 at 162. The main threat to big horn sheep is bacterial pneumonia caused by contact with domestic sheep/goats.

*Elk:* The Colockum elk herd is above population objective, with total herd counts in 2016 at roughly 5,100 animals after hunting season. Bull ratios reached objective with 15 bulls per 100 cows. The Yakima Elk Herd counts are roughly 10,800 total animals in 2016 after hunting season, with the bull ratio objective reached at 15 bulls per 100 cows.

## **Bull Elk Study**

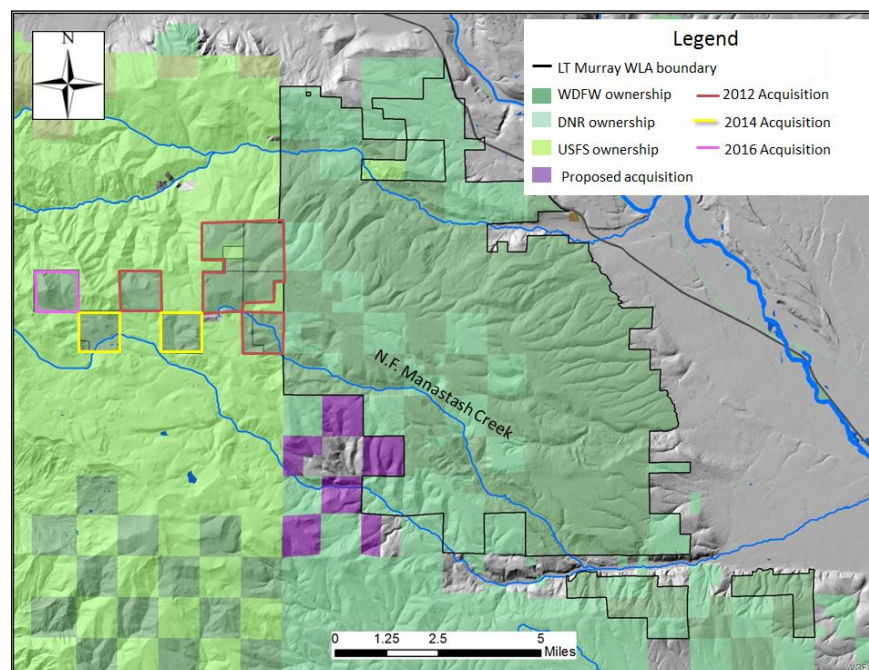
WDFW continues to investigate survival and winter range habitat use of the Colockum Elk Herd. The herd is now above population and bull ratio objectives. Fourteen collars were deployed in 2015. Nine collars remain from 2013-2015 work. A Central Washington University Graduate Student is analyzing daily movements, mortality estimates, and bull elk winter range use.



## Land Acquisition

### *Manastash:*

WDFW staff and partners continue to acquire parcels in the Manastash drainage under the Heart of the Cascades project. The Heart of the Cascades mission is to achieve landscape-level conservation benefits by supporting species recovery, increasing connectivity, and maintaining recreational opportunities while reducing the potential impacts of development. In 2014, WDFW acquired 1240 acres with the addition of two sections in the Gnat Flat area. In 2016, 705 acres were added with the purchase of one section and 3,300 acres were approved for purchase. The majority of the funding is in place for the 3,300 acres with negotiations underway.



*Spiritwind:*

In 2015, 15 acres of previously grazed farmland adjacent to Taneum Creek was acquired to protect vital habitat for fish and wildlife species, and increase flood storage capacity. Without grazing, native riparian vegetation is naturally regenerating throughout the floodplain.

*Quilomene:*

In 2014, WDFW staff proposed the purchase of 125 acres (known as Campbell) of rangeland with several older mobile homes and corrals on site. This property borders the Quilomene Wildlife Area and could be developed as a multi-purpose range to accommodate various shooting disciplines and law enforcement training needs. Establishing a shooting area would reduce garbage, fires, and conflicts caused by dispersed shooting. This property is currently being appraised.

**Road Maintenance and Abandonment Planning (RMAP)**

In 2014, WDFW completed 6.25 miles of road improvements and submitted 3.3 miles of previously closed forest road for formal abandonment. In 2015, WDFW completed 1.6 miles of road improvements and submitted 6.6 miles of previously closed forest road for formal abandonment. In 2016, WDFW completed 1.5 miles of road improvements and completed 0.25 miles of road abandonment.

**Timber Management**

A Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) crew hand-thinned overstocked timber stands on approximately 75 acres in the Taneum Creek Watershed. Over 100 trees were added to Taneum Creek to improve fish habitat and stream function. Other felled trees were burned to reduced fuels or piled to create habitat for small mammals. More than 200 trees were girdled or high-stumped to provide structures for cavity nesters.

**Weed Control**

For the past three years, roughly 583 acres were treated using a variety of methods. Roughly 555 acres were treated with herbicide application, 0.1 acre was treated by hand pulling weeds, and 28 acres were treated with bio-control insects. An estimated 4,250 *Larinus Minutus* and *Bangasternus fausti* bio-control insects were released to control diffuse knapweed. About 1,000 *Galerucella californiensis* bio-control insects were released to control purple loosestrife. Staff continues to monitor and treat weeds from the Colockum-Tarps fire. Kittitas County Weed Board staff assisted with weed management on the two elk feed lots within the LT Murray Wildlife Area.



Thinning in Taneum Creek Watershed.

## Grazing

The use of prescriptive livestock grazing is permitted on the Wildlife Area to manipulate vegetation and facilitate coordinated resource management. The following table shows pasture utilization 2014-2016.

### *Quilomene:*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Pasture Utilized</b>	<b>Month</b>	<b>AUMs</b>
2014	Whiskey Jim	April	75
	Lower Parke	May-June	105
2015	Lower Parke	April-May	88
	Vantage Highway	May	160
	Upper Parke	June	75
2016	Vantage Highway	April-May	69
	S Wild Horse	May, September	25
	Whiskey Jim	May-June	155
	Upper Parke	July	66

The grazing permit for these pastures expired in 2015 and was temporarily renewed for 2016 in order to align with other Collaborative Resource Management (CRM) grazing contracts that expired in 2016. Utilization monitoring in 2014 indicated 4% use in the Whiskey Jim pasture and 43% in the Lower Parke pasture. Subsequent precautions ensured that utilization in this pasture was much lower the following year. In 2015, utilization was between 8% and 15% in each pasture at the end of the growing season. In 2016, monitoring indicated light use across pastures with a few areas of 20% use or above near watering, bedding, and loafing sites. Whiskey Jim had the highest pasture use at 27%. Wildlife area staff continue to annually repair fences, install riparian exclosures, monitor forage utilization, and maintain water developments to support the program.

### *LT Murray:*

The following table shows utilization 2014-2016 for the temporary sheep grazing permit across 4,500 acres of forest community in the LT Murray. Permits are renewed annually.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Month</b>	<b>AUMs</b>
2014	August-September	129
2015	August	32
2016	September	58

In 2014, WDFW acquired the Gnat Flat parcels, located in the forested, western portion of the LT Murray Wildlife Area. These parcels are part of the USFS's Manastash sheep grazing allotment. WDFW entered into a temporary grazing agreement. This agreement continues to be year to year as monitoring and negotiations continue. Utilization monitoring has shown negligible use on most of the allotment with roughly 7% use in the heaviest utilized areas, with the exception of one site that showed use of between 20 and 40%.

## **Naneum Ridge to Columbia River Recreation and Access Plan**

Partnering on the creation of the plan, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and WDFW have taken an integrated approach to quality restoration planning, land management and recreational use over a large geographic area. The plan was drafted to provide guidance for recreation and access and highlights specific management objectives and strategies for the Naneum area. This plan was vetted through public stakeholder meetings and State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review. DNR Commissioner Goldmark and WDFW Director signed the plan adopting it into state management.

## **NEW ISSUES**

### **Forest Health Grants**

#### *RCO Forest and Aquatic Habitat Restoration Project:*

LT Murray staff, Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group, Yakama Nation and the Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative were successful in acquiring Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) funds to treat approximately 800 –1,000 acres of upland timber stands and improve riparian function in the Manastash Creek drainage. Logs and root wads will be placed in Manastash Creek with helicopters to aid in floodplain reconnection and stream aggradation.

#### *DNR Funded Forest Health Project:*

Over stocked upland timber stands will be thinned in Taneum and Hutchins to restore the forest to historic stand structure. Fire resiliency, habitat enhancement, and forest health are the driving factors for this work.

The following table depicts the timeline for upcoming thinning work.

<b>Location</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Status</b>
Taneum Pre Commercial	188	Contract has been awarded. Work proposed spring 2017.
Taneum Commercial	439	RFQ and log sort auctions will occur in spring 2017 with work commencing in summer 2017.
Hutchins	705	RFQ and log sort auctions will occur in spring 2017 with work commencing in summer 2017.

## **MAJOR STEWARDSHIP ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

### **Livestock Fence Construction ~ 5 miles**

Two fence projects, Whiskey Dick and Parke Creek, were constructed in 2014-2015. These fences allow full implementation of the Wild Horse CRM grazing program, and reduce the incidence of trespass livestock on the Quilomene Wildlife Area. The Whiskey Dick project installed roughly 3 miles of livestock fence along Skookumchuck Creek and the eastern boundary of the Wild Horse Wind Facility. The Parke Creek project of 2015 installed nearly 2 miles of fence line along the northern WDFW ownership boundary. Completion of the Parke Creek fence allowed permitted grazing of the Upper Parke pasture, which was unavailable for the first four years of the permit.

## **Heart K**

Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), WA Department of Transportation (WSDOT), and WDFW worked cooperatively to address elk escapement and excessive riparian browsing on BOR property adjacent to the WLA. Partners installed a solar panel and an electrified chain structure across Taneum Creek to prevent elk access to public roadways (I-90) and private agricultural lands. BOR and WDFW designed two elk exclosures to promote riparian recruitment in a preferred loafing area of the Taneum Creek Floodplain. Roughly twenty acres will be protected until vegetation matures creating a more diverse and dense stand of riparian habitat along Taneum Creek. Crews will work to finish installation of exclosures in 2017.

## **STATUS REPORT OF 2014-2016 PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

Key performance measures are identified each year to monitor progress and identify issues that might interfere with planned priority activities. This information will be used to delete, add, or alter priority strategies for 2017-2018.

<b>2014-16 Performance Measure</b>	<b>Status of Performance Measure</b>	<b>Explanation of Progress/ Related Activity/ Comments</b>
Meet with Wildlife Area Advisory Committee annually	Not completed	Meeting held August 2014.
Maintain 13 miles of elk fence annually	Completed	Made repairs as necessary. Requested funds to replace poor sections.
Maintain 65 miles of grazing boundary fence	Completed	Maintained boundary fence, focusing on sections needed for the grazing program and to exclude trespass livestock. Installed ~5 miles of boundary fence where currently none exists.
Implement 2 grazing programs	Completed	Implemented grazing rotation, monitoring, fence maintenance and riparian protections.
Feed elk (approximately 600 tons of hay) annually	Completed. Warm winter temps and little snow reduced average hay fed.	2014-15: 178 ton over 50 days 2015-16: 523 ton over 94 days
Release ~400 pheasants annually at Green Gate unit	Completed	~350 pheasant were released annually in 2014, 2015, and 2016.
Annually treat $\geq$ 500 acres of upland weeds, including 30 mi. of road-side weeds	Completed	~580 acres treated, including uplands and roadsides.

<b>2014-16 Performance Measure</b>	<b>Status of Performance Measure</b>	<b>Explanation of Progress/ Related Activity/ Comments</b>
Road issues identified in the RMAP process were completed by the June 30, 2016 deadline.	Completed scheduled work annually	Improved 9 mi of road, submitted 10 mi of closed forest roads for formal abandonment.
Identify RMAP needs on new acquisitions	Completed	All road issues on recently acquired properties have been addressed.
Staff attends fire and first aid training, and pesticide license renewal as required.	Completed annually	Staff completed first aid/ CPR and annual fire training. Spray licenses were renewed annually.
Repair/remove at least 1 mile of degraded fence	Partially Completed	Staff repaired 1/2 mile of stock fence.
Complete required annual plans and reports	Completed	Completed RMAP and PR reports each year.

### **NEW STRATEGIES**

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

#### **Agency Objective: Protect, Restore and Enhance Fish and Wildlife and Their Habitats**

1. Protect, restore and enhance wetland and riparian habitats
  - A. Strategy: Implement forest health projects to treat overstocked forest stands, create snags, and improve watershed function in Manastash and Taneum watersheds. Timeframe: 2017
  - B. Strategy: Finish constructing elk exclosures on the Heart K property to allow for natural recruitment of the riparian area. Timeframe: 2017
  - C. Strategy: Enhance road closures and remove dispersed camping from stream banks in the newly acquired sections of the L.T. Murray. Timeframe: 2017-2018

#### **Agency Objective: Provide Sustainable Fish and Wildlife-Related Recreational and Commercial Opportunities Compatible With Maintaining Healthy Fish and Wildlife Populations and Habitats.**

1. Provide public access compatible with fish, wildlife and habitat protection
  - A. Strategy: Begin implementation of the Naneum to Columbia Recreation Plan. Timeframe: 2017-2018
  - B. Strategy: Develop and install signage that notifies the public of recently acquired property (specifically in the Manastash acquisition) and the laws that govern recreational use. Timeframe: 2017
2. Provide commercial opportunities compatible with fish, wildlife and habitat protection.



- A. Strategy: Implement the 5-year Quilomene grazing permit. Timeframe: 2017-2021
- B. Strategy: Implement the annual LT Murray grazing permit. Timeframe: 2017-2018
- C. Continue to work with user groups to provide opportunities for special uses. Timeline: 2017-2018

**Agency Objective: Minimize Adverse Interactions Between Humans and Wildlife.**

- 1. Monitor and manage public access to minimize negative effects on fish and wildlife.
  - A. Strategy: Maintain winter closures on the LT Murray and Whiskey Dick Wildlife Areas. Timeframe: 2017-2018
  - B. Strategy: Replace/repair 13 miles of elk fence along the LT Murray perimeter that is degrading and providing elk access to agricultural areas. Timeframe: 2018-2022.

**Agency Objective: Ensure WDFW Activities, Programs, Facilities and Lands are Consistent with Local, State and Federal Regulations that Protect and Recover Fish, Wildlife and Their Habitats**

- 1. Manage weeds consistent with state and county rules to protect and recovery fish and wildlife and their habitats.
  - A. Strategy: Collaborate with the county and USFS in weed treatment. Timeframe: 2017-2018
- 2. Protect cultural resources consistent with state and federal law.
  - A. Strategy: Perform cultural resource surveys and protection prior to thinning work and barrier enhancements on closed roads. Timeframe: 2017-2018

**Agency Objective: Reconnect with Those Interested in Washington’s Fish and Wildlife**

- 1. Involve the public in projects on the wildfire area.
  - A. Strategy: Provide opportunities for public engagement of trash and old fence removal. Timeframe: 2017-2018
  - B. Strategy: Provide opportunities for groups to recreate on the wildlife area (ie. running races, poker rides, etc.). Timeline: 2017-2018
  - C. Strategy: Engage the public in a project to install a Watchable Wildlife Platform at the elk feeding station. Timeline: 2017-2018
  - D. Strategy: Improve wildlife area kiosks to include interpretive information and appropriate regulatory signage. Timeline: 2017-2021

**2017-18 PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

Performance measures for the LT Murray Wildlife Area are listed below. Accomplishments and progress toward desired outcomes are monitored and evaluated biennially.

- 1) Meet with Advisory Committee annually
- 2) Maintain 13 miles of elk fence on the LT Murray Wildlife Area
- 3) Maintain 65 miles of boundary fence on the Quilomene and Whiskey Dick Wildlife Areas
- 4) Feed roughly 400-600 tons of hay each winter to minimize elk depredation on private land
- 5) Release approximately 350 pheasants annually in the Green Gate area

- 6) Control weed infestations on ~500 acres
- 7) Implement permitted livestock grazing rotation, including monitoring and fence maintenance
- 8) Identify RMAP needs on new acquisitions
- 9) Complete annual PR reports

## **WILDLIFE AREA ADVISORY COMMITTEE INPUT**

The WAAC meeting was held on April 4, 2017

Attendees:

Bill Essman, Kittitas County Field and Stream Club  
Clay Graham, Recreation (motorized and non-motorized)  
Craig Schnebly, Mule Deer Foundation  
Marc Eylar, Kittitas County Weed Board  
Jason Ridlon, Back Country Horseman  
Jason Scribner, Kittitas Audubon  
Joe Smith, DNR Acting Forest Operations District Manager  
Sam Kayser, Landowner, Kittitas County Cattleman's Association  
Scott Nicolai, hunter, non-motorized creation, conservationist

WDFW staff included wildlife area manager Melissa Babik, wildlife area assistant manager Noel Winegeart, forester Rod Pfeifle, and Greg Mackey acting as facilitator.

Lana Cruse attended as additional guest.

### **Meeting Summary:**

#### **Forest Health:**

**Rod Pfeifle:** WDFW statewide forester.

Pfeifle led a discussion on forest health and presented three upcoming forest thinning projects in Hutchins, Taneum, and Robinson drainages. Pfeifle explained historic fire suppression altered the composition of our forest from an open pine dominated system to an over-stocked shade tolerant Douglas and grand fir forest. Pfeifle described the upcoming thinning prescription that will include elements of the individual, clumps, and openings techniques and stocking/spacing strategies. Work will include "thinning from below" to remove smaller diameter (4-8 inch) suppressed trees and promote larger tree growth. He described polygon marking, snag creation methods, and the removal of trees with pathogens and/or insect attack. Pfeifle explained the constraints of thinning projects and showed units that may be slated for pre-commercial work. The proposed thinning work will restore the forest to a more historic condition and improve ecological integrity. The LT Murray will create a 10-year forest management plan followed by a 10-year action plan. Bill Essman asked if WDFW has acquired funding for the three upcoming thinning projects. Pfeifle confirmed funding is in place. Marc Eylar asked if there were plans for post thinning restoration of disturbed sites. Pfeifle answered that slash will be used wherever

possible to reduce bare soils, and that disturbance sites will be reseeded with native grasses and treated for weeds by LT Murray staff.

#### Clay Graham

Graham asked if the proposed thinning projects could permit the public to remove small diameter (pole) trees. Jason Scribner wondered if the Moonlight project site has an opportunity for permits. Pfeifle responded that the units proposed for thinning in 2017 do not have much opportunity for pole permits. Scott Nicolai mentioned that DNR has areas in Taneum that would be suitable for pole permitting.

#### Craig Schnebly

Schnebly asked if there has been consideration for wintering elk thermal cover adjacent to elk feeding sites. He pointed out that there will be no regeneration of trees near feeding sites because of the abundance of elk and the tendency of bulls to rub their antlers killing young trees. Pfeifle will incorporate Schnebly's suggestion of leaving more thermal cover adjacent to feed lots and encouraged WAAC members to come forth with such concerns. Pfeifle suggested that LT Murray staff host a tour of project sites for WAAC members in late May. Sam Kayser spoke up in favor of field tours. Melissa Babik agreed to organize the tour.

#### Scott Nicolai

Nicolai stated that there are areas in the LT Murray that are very thick with small diameter trees and that the risk of catastrophic fire is great without more thinning projects. He wanted to see more funding for reducing fuel loads. Nicolai asked for the WAAC to unanimously support forest health projects and request funding from the legislature to continue thinning work. Nicolai solicited community support for WDFW's thinning work to get ahead of the large fires that are likely to happen.

#### Sam Kayser

Kayser agreed that more money needs to be spent on fire prevention.

#### Joe Smith

Smith agreed with implementing forest health projects and stated that funding fire prevention projects are less costly than firefighting. He mentioned that outreach was important so that when funding becomes available community members will be supportive of fire prevention projects. Smith explained the TAPASH Sustainable Collaborative Forest Initiative to implement a collaborative approach to ecosystem health across land ownership.

#### Bill Essman

Essman stated that it is too late to request funding from the legislature this year.

#### Marc Eylar

Eylar suggested a proposal be drafted defining forest health projects so that the WAAC had a better understanding on what was proposed on the landscape. He agreed forest thinning is important but perhaps not the best management strategy for all sites. The committee agreed that more money is needed for forest health projects but needs more specifics before requesting funding from the legislature.

### Jason Ridlon

Ridlon would like to see more merchantable timber projects.

### Jason Scribner

Scribner asked if thinning projects could allow the public to harvest firewood. Pfeifle mentioned that there is opportunity for firewood cutting projects but there is a liability concern. WDFW will look for small thinning projects in appropriate locations to provide the public with permits for fire wood removal. Nicolai commented that permitting firewood removal will help improve trust in government.

### Land Acquisition

Melissa Babik presented the recent land purchase at Gnat flats and the upcoming purchases of the “Legoman” parcels. Ridlon asked why WDFW purchased the old Plum Creek sections in Manastash that are surrounded by forest in poor ecological condition. Babik explained the need to put those properties into public ownership for habitat protection as migration corridors and to protect against the risk of development. Nicolai added that if those parcels were developed forest health projects would be unlikely and an increased effort for fire suppression would occur.

### Naneum Recreation Plan

Melissa Babik presented the strategies that LT Murray staff is responsible for implementing with the Naneum Recreation Plan. Babik hoped to have plans to the WAAC by the fall. For Objective F, reducing open road densities from 24 miles of road to 12 miles, Essman commented that the Field and Stream Club (KCFS) was not notified of this mileage reduction prior to the final plan. He stated that the KCFS submitted a map of road density totaling over 24 miles that they felt should be adopted into the Green Dot system. Babik has heard this concern before and promised to work with senior staff members that were present at those meetings to search for drafts of the Naneum Recreation Plan that could demonstrate the planning process was sound.

### Elk

Melissa Babik presented a project to reduce elk escapement via Taneum Creek. Babik showed photos of a solar charged electric elk fence that was installed across Taneum Creek that has successfully reduced elk presence on private land and the freeway. Kayser asked for the cost of the electric fence and wondered if it could be used to surround private property in Parke Creek. Babik will ask the Bureau of Reclamation, who purchased and installed the fence, for a breakdown of costs and get that to WAAC members. She commented that the structure is only intended for small sections like that of a creek crossing. Schnebly added that a full elk fence surrounding the private property would be cheaper.

### Other topics

Scribner asked if WDFW deems Shell Rock Road safe for public travel as it crosses through a creek and is winding. Essman and Schnebly confirmed it is drivable. Babik acknowledged many of the WLA roads are in primitive condition for passenger cars, but that funding is not available for repairs. Essman wondered if WDFW is purchasing private property off Manastash Road that could provide connectivity to the Green Dot system. Babik responded that it was taken off the priority acquisition list. Essman suggested adding a Green Dot road connecting through DNR

that could tie into Shell Rock. Babik replied that it was not WDFW ownership so she could not speak to that.

Lana Kruse asked if WAAC members vote on projects. Mackey responded that it is not the policy for WAAC members to vote. Kruse and Scribner would like updates on projects. Babik responded that she would like the WAAC to meet once or twice a year for updates.

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**Want to see the full plan?**

Go to –

[http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife\\_areas/management\\_plans/](http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/)