

WDFW RESPONSES TO SEPA AND PSR PUBLIC COMMENTS

WDFW responses to public comments received during the 90-day concurrent public review periods for the draft *Periodic Status Review for the American White Pelican in Washington* conducted from July 12, 2016, to October 10, 2016. The comments presented here are summaries of the remarks provided by one or more people or organizations.

Report Section	Comment and Response
General comments	I remain very concerned about the obvious conflict of interest your agency and USFWS both share; it is in your absolute career, funding, personal and professional interest to "list" and "manage" and "recover" and "plan". You should not be the deciders. We have seen so much abuse of this system that I believe an independent science board not related to or beholden to WDFW should start making unbiased, fair and smart decisions on these species listing status.
	<i>State-listing decisions in Washington are made by the Fish and Wildlife Commission, an independent board of citizens appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the senate. Many members are scientists, and all have knowledge of fish or wildlife issues. Our status reviews and recommendations also receive peer review by regional experts outside WDFW.</i>
	Washington State is literally the only state left that is continually disregarding the outstanding recovery of this species to maintain their listing status, while simultaneously jeopardizing several other listed species (e.g. salmon) that call Washington home.
	<i>White pelicans are also listed as endangered in British Columbia, where they also are restricted to one colony. White pelicans are also a 'species of greatest conservation need' in the Wildlife Action Plans of all eight western states in which they breed (IDFW 2016), and they have various conservation designations (e.g. Oregon: Sensitive; California: Bird Species of Special Concern).</i>
Population status	This species is not even known with certainty to have been native to Washington State in a breeding population. The WDFW's own "Periodic Status Review for the American White Pelican" states that there are no definite records of their nesting in the state other than one from 1926. Your document says they "likely" bred in inland waterways. Where is the actual evidence of such activity? Post-1926 records do not reflect this: what evidence did you rely upon to conclude there were meaningful breeding numbers in those areas prior to 1926?
	<i>Lewis and Clark observed white pelicans in Washington in 1805, and Townsend noted white pelicans in the Columbia in the 1830s, and said that in spring, "they retire inland to breed" (Jobanek and Marshall 1992). As described in the Population Status section, historical information from the 19th and early 20th century is limited, but clearly indicates that white pelicans nested at Moses Lakes, and perhaps Sprague and a few other lakes (Dawson and Bowles 1909, Jewett et al. 1953). The first published record of nesting is from 1926 at Moses Lake, Grant County (Brown 1926); that colony may have persisted into the 1930s. Kitchin (1934) states, "breeds in eastern Washington (commonly at Moses lake)," but there are otherwise no</i>

	<p><i>definite records from that period (Motschenbacher 1984). Motschenbacher (1984) noted that a long-time resident recalled that up to ~500 pelicans were present seasonally on Moses Lake from 1902 until the 1940s, and he listed 4 additional sites where conditions were suitable and pelicans may have once nested. Dawson and Bowles (1909) stated, "Concerning their nesting in Washington, nothing has been preserved; but it is fair to suppose that they have bred, at least until recently, on Moses and Colville Lakes." However, between being shot, colony disturbance, wetland losses, and later, DDT, pelicans declined dramatically nation-wide in the 20th century, and were extirpated as a breeder in Washington from the 1940s until 1994.</i></p>
	<p>The Seattle Audubon Society shows in a map that the white pelican is not a traditional resident species overall, as populations breeding west of the Rocky Mountains "typically move south to California and the west coast of Mexico." Also, there is a scarce presence in Washington during their migration to begin with, while "[s]mall numbers of non-breeding American White Pelicans remain in eastern Washington throughout the year."</p>
	<p><i>Seattle Audubon's Birdweb site has a simple outdated (mid-20th century) North American range map for the species (link below), evidently based on data prior to the pelicans re-establishing themselves as a breeder here 20 years ago. The map shows white pelican's presence in Washington as 'migration (scarce)', and doesn't claim to portray the historical record. The information is correct that white pelicans are a migrant, and much smaller numbers are present during winter, with most moving south. Much more useful and accurate is their map of Washington indicating the seasonal presence of white pelicans, and the year-round presence near the Badger Island colony (note: the indication of breeding at Sprague Lake is not based on confirmed information that we are aware of). (map at http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/bird/american_white_pelican#)</i></p>
	<p>You use a greatly outdated and provably inaccurate overall population estimate of 157,000 during the period of 1998-2001. This information is so outdated as to be of no real scientific value. Why no current estimate? It's obviously a heck of a lot higher...</p>
	<p><i>The 1998-2001 total is the most recent continent-wide estimate; the Breeding Bird Survey trend index (Fig. 3) suggests they have increased substantially since then, but there has been no comprehensive range-wide survey effort. The 2014 tally for western colonies was 42,692 (Table 1). White pelicans are not a high priority for surveys in most states and provinces, hence range-wide estimates were infrequently updated. However, the Pacific Flyway Council (2013) has outlined a schedule for monitoring western colonies every three years.</i></p>
	<p>The other population center of white pelicans in Washington is in the Columbia River estuary on Miller Sands Spit, which hosted a colony of 144 nests in 2015. Furthermore, this particular colony's area, as well as shorelines of water bodies used by pelicans for most of their foraging, is regulated by the Department of Ecology under the Shoreline Management Act.</p>
	<p><i>Miller Sands is in Oregon, and therefore not protected under the Shoreline</i></p>

	<p><i>Management Act, a Washington regulation. Although access is theoretically restricted, human intruders camped near the pelicans' colony in 2014, causing flightless young to abandon the colony. Many were rescued from the water by researchers and taken to a rehab facility (see Human disturbance)</i></p>
<p>Factors Affecting White Pelicans in Washington</p>	<p>The species has been federally delisted since 1987, and Washington's continued listing of this species (despite being a state that doesn't even enjoy being within the species' main migratory route) can hardly be said to have been the only force upholding the resurgence and explosion of the white pelican species around the country.</p>
	<p><i>The American white Pelican was never listed under the federal ESA. As mentioned under Range-wide population status, Sloan (1982) suggested that they should be listed as threatened, but they were never formally petitioned, or listed.</i></p> <p><i>Since the Badger Island colony has become the fourth largest western colony, and the birds from Stum Lake, BC, likely migrate through the area, Washington is considered to be within the species' migratory route.</i></p>
	<p>It is only a matter of time before the white pelican population (considering it is growing at an incredible rate) starts causing <i>serious</i> damage to the smolt populations in the Columbia Basin. There is only passing reference to the growing problem of more than 1,000 of these large predators on the Yakima River between the mouth and the dam at Parker. The Yakima River is subject to low flows and excessive temperatures during periods of salmon (endangered) smolt presence and migration. What studies have you conducted looking for evidence of high predation losses by the pelican on this section of this water? Where is your PIT data for the Yakima? How smart is it to spend millions hatching smolt to feed this ravenous predator?</p>
	<p><i>The impacts of the fish-eating birds in the Columbia River system has been a subject of investigation for >20 years. As discussed in Fisheries conflicts, all the data (including PIT data) suggest that Caspian Terns and Cormorants and more important predators of smolts than the Badger Island white pelican colony. Pelicans prefer larger prey such as carp, suckers, and pikeminnows. Yakima River Summer and Fall Chinook, the smolts that most often fall prey to pelicans (based on PIT tags found on the colony), are not ESA-listed. Nonetheless, they may be taking a significant number of smolts at certain places and times on the Yakima, which may require management action in the future to discourage them. Pelicans are very conspicuous and may receive more than their share of blame for predation on smolts and fish of recreational value.</i></p>
	<p>This bird represents a threat to human life and property destruction via bird strike on commercial and general aviation aircraft. Migrating geese are another issue, but they tend to stay below 2500 feet and often travel in larger flocks more easy to detect and avoid. Please consider this issue when contemplating protection of this species.</p>
	<p><i>Of 151,267 bird strikes on U. S. civilian aircraft in the 25 years from 1990-2014, there were 16 involving white pelicans (Dolbeer et al. 2015). Although extremely rare, strikes involving pelicans are extremely dangerous because of their large size. Nonetheless, this record compares with 4,675 strikes involving ducks, geese, or swans, >10,000 involving raptors (eagles, hawks, falcons, owls), and >10,000</i></p>

	<i>involving gulls. We do not believe that conservation considerations for pelicans should be diminished or eliminated over this issue, but neither should bird strike hazard mitigation near airports be compromised for concern about pelican populations.</i>
Conclusion and recommendation	You acknowledge that populations have recovered substantially yet conclude they are still vulnerable. What evidence is there of that, and what would cause mass mortality under present conditions? They have grown from first observation in the early 1990's to over 100,000, a rapid, sustained growth. I see no real threats to this bird that can be reasonably anticipated. I support a downgrading all the way to removal on the State and Federal lists. It cannot be said that this species is likely to become endangered “ <i>within the foreseeable future</i> ” either. Between the 1960s and 1980, the number of known breeding colonies went from 43 to 55, and population of breeding white pelicans went from 63,000 to 109,000. The National Audubon entity actually supports the assertion that their health as a species is optimistic, pointing out that the white pelican population has experienced a “substantial increase since 1970s.” The International Union for Conservation of Nature (“IUCN”) finds the condition of the species to be of the least concern.
	<i>The numbers mentioned, and the conservation status terms used by national and international organizations refer to the entire continental population. This comment confuses the continent-wide numbers (>157,000) with Washington’s population of ~3,200 breeding adults. The Washington listing rule (WAC 232-12-297) refers to only the status of the species in Washington. Washington hosts only one colony, and white pelican nesting colonies are very sensitive. Disturbance by predators or humans could result in colony abandonment and extirpation as a breeding species in Washington. Diseases, including West Nile Virus and Type C botulism have caused multiple mortality events (e.g. 9,000 and 8,500 deaths) in the last 20 years. White pelicans were also persecuted historically by fishermen, although they most often feed on non-game fish such as suckers and carp.</i>
	I believe the white pelican should be kept on the endangered list because it is easily disturbed by humans and predators, and at risk to changes in water levels.
	<i>Comment noted. The species is sensitive to disturbance and can be affected by water level changes. However, white pelicans have been steadily increasing for ~20 years in Washington and regionally. For these reasons, their status is more consistent with ‘threatened’, as defined in the WAC.</i>
	I support revising the protection status of the American White Pelican to “threatened”. They appear to have few threats to their existence in Washington, and their numbers have increased markedly.
	<i>Comment noted.</i>
	WDFW has rightfully proposed a down-listing of the white pelican on the state ESA, as the species can’t reasonably be considered endangered in a scientific or legal sense any longer. The white pelican no longer fits the definition of endangered, or threatened, or even sensitive in the state of Washington based on the definitions provided by WAC 232-12-297. Not only is this population increasing, but it is

	<p>entirely protected by federal regulation, as the island happens to be situated within the McNary National Wildlife Refuge, thus falling under theegis of the FWS.</p>
	<p><i>The national wildlife refuge status of Badger Island provides some protection, but completely eliminating the potential for trespass on an uninhabited island is impossible, as demonstrated by the disturbance of the Miller Sands, Oregon, colony. Redundant federal/state protections can provide more than one option for prosecution, which can be an advantage, and state and federal laws often provide parallel prohibitions. [In regards to the WAC definitions of threatened and sensitive, see the response to the next comment.]</i></p>
	<p>‘Sensitive’ is defined in WAC 232-12-297 as a species “native to the state of Washington that is vulnerable or declining and is likely to become endangered or threatened in a significant portion of its range within the state without cooperative management or removal of threats.” As is very clear, even this relaxed statutory definition does not reasonably apply to a species that is increasing in both population size and overall health in the state of Washington, and around the entire country. It seems as though the WDFW is under the misguided impression that a species must be down-listed sequentially, occupying all three tiers before full delisting approval. There is no such requirement.</p>
	<p><i>Agreed, there is no requirement that down-listing be incremental through each step. We considered down-listing to sensitive or delisting white pelicans. However, Section 4.2 states, “A species may be delisted from endangered, threatened, or sensitive only when populations are no longer in danger of failing, declining, are no longer vulnerable”. There is only 1 colony in Washington, and colonies are prone to abandonment if disturbed by humans or predators, and major disturbances to the Badger Island colony could lead to the extirpation of the species as a breeder in Washington. Given this situation, along with the history of persecution, we interpret this species status as being at least ‘vulnerable.’ We will revisit their listing status in five years.</i></p>