



## Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife 2020 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts

*The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is the state agency tasked with preserving, protecting and perpetuating fish, wildlife, and ecosystems, while providing sustainable fishing and hunting opportunities.*

**WDFW Director:** Kelly Susewind is entering his third year as director at WDFW, after 28 years at the Washington Department of Ecology. A lifelong outdoorsman and longtime resident of Washington, Susewind took advantage of the natural resources where he grew up in Grays Harbor County, hunting Roosevelt elk, fishing for salmon and digging for razor clams. He now oversees 1,800 employees throughout the state, in their mission of conserving fish and wildlife and providing sustainable recreational and commercial opportunities. Under Susewind's leadership, the department has successfully transitioned to mostly working from home, embraced new forms of technology to accomplish goals and objectives, and has increased efforts to be good stewards of our public lands, as record numbers of people enjoy them during uncertain times that are encouraging many to get outside even more than normal.

**Southern Resident Killer Whale Recovery Progress:** In the past two years, four calves have been born within the Southern Resident killer whale pods, and as of fall 2020, all four calves are healthy. In 2020 WDFW increased vessel patrols in central and southern Puget Sound to protect Southern Resident killer whales. The Department also coordinated with the crab fishing industry and Washington Whale Working Group to minimize risk of whale entanglements. WDFW, tribes, and public utility districts received \$13.54 million in the 2020 operating budget to increase production of hatchery salmon by over 26 million smolts annually. The legislature also provided \$40 million (20 percent increase) to make capital improvements to hatcheries. The Brian Abbott Fish Barrier Removal Board is working on a statewide strategy to correct fish passage barriers to support salmon and Southern Resident killer whale recovery. WDFW also received support for management of pinniped populations on the lower Columbia River and its tributaries to increase Chinook salmon production for Southern Resident killer whales. WDFW is currently developing a commercial whale-watching licensing program and is accepting public comments through December 5, 2020. WDFW thanks the conservation districts for adapting to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic to lead the third annual Orca Recovery Day - October 17, 2020 in a virtual format. Additional information on Southern Resident killer whale recovery efforts is included in other sections of this report. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/at-risk/species-recovery/orca> and <https://wdfw.medium.com/help-protect-southern-resident-killer-whales-this-orca-recovery-day-oct-17-aaf6ff208776>.

**Species Periodic Status Reviews:** WDFW periodically reviews the status of protected species in the state and makes recommendations that are available for public review to list, downlist, or delist for Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) approval. In 2020, the Department initiated periodic status reviews for Gray whale, Humpback whale, and Greater sage-grouse. These documents are available for public review through December 21, 2020. Comments received during 90-day public comment periods for each status review will be incorporated before the Department provides recommendations to the FWC. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/at-risk/status-review>.

**Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP):** WDFW's VSP-focused efforts in 2020 were largely related to the first round of 5-year implementation reports. For most of the year, Habitat Program Science Division staff have been working to complete and deliver High Resolution Change Detection (HRCd) analysis data to those VSP counties which specified in their VSP Work Plans the use of HRCd as a monitoring tool. In the spring of 2020, Habitat Program Ecosystem Services Division staff, with input from regional Habitat Program biologists, reviewed and provided Technical Panel recommendations to the SCC on the Chelan County and Thurston County 5-year reports. In the fall, the Department recruited for and hired an internal VSP Coordinator who will



## Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife 2020 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts

be focusing for the remainder of the biennium on reviewing and assessing the remaining 5-year reports and supporting regional staff who provide technical assistance to the county-level VSP Work Groups.

**Priority Habitats and Species (PHS) Riparian Update:** In the summer of 2020, a professionally designed color version of Riparian Ecosystems Volume 1: Science Synthesis and Management Implications was added to the PHS document library on the WDFW website:  
<https://wdfw.wa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/01987/wdfw01987.pdf>. This updated version is not substantively different from the original final Volume 1 manuscript published in May 2018, but in addition to the photographs and other visuals added, the content was edited lightly to improve clarity and readability. Before the end of 2020, WDFW intends to publish the final manuscript of PHS Riparian Ecosystems Volume 2: Management Recommendations. WDFW has also developed an associated riparian ecosystems online mapping tool that will help users determine the extent of the recommended riparian management zone (RMZ) at the site-scale. This tool is available now on the WDFW website:

<https://wdfw.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=35b39e40a2af447b9556ef1314a5622d>.

The Department is also continuing to work on technical support tools to assist others with implementing these PHS riparian documents and is looking forward to hearing from Conservation Districts about their ideas and experiences.

**2021 Legislative Session:** In a state valued for its outdoors, less than one percent of the state general fund goes to support all of the state's natural resource agencies combined - that includes the Department of Natural Resources, State Parks, the Recreation and Conservation Office, the State Conservation Commission, Department of Ecology, the Puget Sound Partnership, and the Department of Fish and Wildlife. The Covid-19 pandemic took a toll on Washington's economy resulting in an initial estimated shortfall of \$9 billion dollars for the 2021-2023 biennium (recently revised to \$4.5 billion shortfall). In response to this shortfall the Governor's Office directed cabinet agencies and requested non-cabinet agencies (like WDFW) to submit options for a 15 percent reduction in State General Fund appropriations on an on-going basis. WDFW identified \$23.5 million of reductions including severe reductions in salmon and trout hatcheries, fisheries monitoring, land management, conservation work, volunteer grant capacity, warmwater gamefish management, and orca and global wildlife trafficking enforcement. WDFW is not encouraging these reductions and we intend to advocate that these areas are not good places to reduce funding given the conservation, economic, and public health benefits from these investments. During the pandemic, outdoor recreation in America increased so much that a campaign called "Recreate Responsibly" emerged to encourage people to be safe and leave no trace while enjoying the outdoors. Washingtonians spent more time outdoors including increased participation in fishing and hunting. Fishing license sales increased 24 percent, hunting license sales increased four percent, and razor clam license sales increased a whopping 261 percent relative to 2019. Anglers, clam diggers, and hunters provide an economic boost when they buy equipment, fuel, food and lodging while recreating. Increased participation in fishing and hunting is another example of the benefits of continued funding of WDFW's work. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/administration/budget/update>.

**Wolves:** Since 2008, Washington's wolf population has grown by an average of 28 percent per year. WDFW and the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (CTCR) documented a minimum of 145 individuals, 26 packs, and 10 successful breeding pairs (not including CTCR breeding pairs because they were not surveyed) during the last annual population survey (2019). The CTCR considers wolves on their lands recovered and did not conduct a formal count in 2019. Because this is a minimum count, the actual number of wolves in Washington is likely higher. This marks the 11<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of population growth. On August 1, 2019, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife invited the public to comment on the scope of a post-recovery plan for wolves in Washington. A post-recovery conservation and management plan for wolves will



## Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife 2020 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts

guide long-term wolf conservation and management where wolves are managed under state authority once the wolf population in Washington is considered recovered and is no longer designated as state or federally endangered. The planning process is ongoing and public input to date is available [here](#). On October 29, 2020, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service [announced](#) that gray wolves in much of the contiguous 48 states will be delisted from the federal Endangered Species Act. WDFW is committed to the recovery of gray wolves in Washington and they remain listed as endangered by WDFW throughout the state. We will continue to work closely with partners, stakeholders, and communities, just as we have over the past decade, on the recovery, conservation, and management of wolves in Washington, with a focus on achieving the state's recovery objectives and reducing conflict between wolves and livestock. Most wolves in the state (85 percent of known packs in 2019) were not involved in any documented livestock depredation. WDFW lethally removed nine wolves from a pack that was involved in repeated depredations of livestock in 2019 following the guidance of the state's [Wolf Conservation and Management Plan](#) and [wolf-livestock interaction protocol](#). As of this writing, three wolves from the Wedge Pack (comprising the entire pack) were lethally removed in 2020. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/at-risk/species-recovery/gray-wolf>. If you are interested in receiving email notifications of wolf activity updates, you can [sign up here](#).

**Coordinated Resource Management (CRM):** WDFW continues to participate in multiple CRMs around Washington, including the following:

- Okanogan County:
  - Chopaka CRM (Wahl) (Sinlahekin & Scotch Creek Wildlife Areas)
  - Ellemeham (Dagnon) CRM (Scotch Creek Wildlife Area)
  - Scholz (Sinlahekin & Scotch Creek Wildlife Areas)
  - Mt. Hull CRM (Scotch Creek Wildlife Area)
  - Funk Mountain (Sinlahekin & Scotch Creek Wildlife Areas)
  - South Summit/Chiliwist CRM (Sinlahekin Wildlife Area)
  - Double R (Sinlahekin Wildlife Area)
  - Methow CRM (Methow Wildlife Area)
  - Spears (Sinlahekin Wildlife Area – for wolf conflict discussion only) may not be annual
- Klickitat County – Simcoe Unit, Klickitat Wildlife Area
- Kittitas County – Wild Horse CRM (L.T. Murray Wildlife Area)
- Stevens County – Black Wolf CRM (Sherman Creek Wildlife Area)
- Asotin County – on-going discussions about creating a new CRM, Blue Mountains Wildlife Area Complex units

The department also continues to work collaboratively with Kittitas County Conservation District and Washington Department of Natural Resources to fund fencing projects and hardened stream cattle crossings and monitor implementation of a livestock grazing plan on the Teanaway Community Forest. On the Big Bend Wildlife Area, we continue to work closely with a permittee who is receiving Sage Grouse Initiative funding to manage grazing in grouse habitat.

**Grazing Program Review:** WDFW is updating its grazing rules in the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) and the Fish and Wildlife Commission Grazing Policy to align with what we are already doing and to ensure they are clear and consistent. A Grazing Guidelines and Tools document has been developed that is part of our regular process to review and update policies. This document exists to clarify: consistency with WDFW's mission, complies with state law, agency policy and legal agreements, ensure consistent implementation of grazing on DFW lands statewide, compatibility with WDFW's goal to provide sustainable fish- and wildlife-related recreation, and is consistent with the Fish and Wildlife Commission's policy to maintain ecological



## Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife 2020 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts

integrity. The document lays out the purpose, goals, roles, and processes related to grazing management on DFW lands. Two new tools described are a Grazing Evaluation Framework that is used to evaluate potential new grazing on DFW lands and a set of wolf-livestock conflict reduction guidelines, template for associated permit language, and process for evaluation in the event of elevated risk of such conflict. The development of the wolf-livestock conflict guidelines and associated process development involved engagement of many stakeholders over the course of 2019, including an in-depth workshop with representative members of both the conservation and producer community in November of 2019. In May 2020, WDFW held two targeted stakeholder outreach briefings with over 25 participants, which was intended to be pre-State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) discussion of our entire grazing program review. The official SEPA comment period was in September and there was a public hearing at the Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting in October. We anticipate a final decision on the WAC and FWC policy will occur at the January 2021 Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/commission/meetings/2020/22-24october2020-fwc-agenda>.

**Wolf-Livestock Conflict Reduction Measures in Grazing Permits:** Entering the 2020 grazing season, we applied the new wolf-livestock conflict approach by adding the template language to new permits and assessing the risk and any need to add additional measures to reduce the potential for conflict in places where active wolf packs were present in the vicinity. Of the several permits that went through internal review, only two resulted in changes (adding additional nonlethal deterrents). Department staff provided the Director with a range of options to choose moving forward on these two permits, which included removing livestock, and the Director chose to keep cows on the land with additional deterrent measures that the permittees agreed to add to their permits.

**Collaborative Weed Management:** WDFW typically treats about 12,000 acres of weeds annually using integrated pest management and often works cooperatively with other agencies, tribes, counties, and non-profits to conduct mutually beneficial projects across ownership boundaries. After the Governor's Stay Home/Stay Healthy order in March, WDFW quickly reached out to WSDA and county weed boards across the state and, based on their response and internal discussion, began weed management as an essential function in mid-April to meet legal and environmental obligations and mitigate fire risk on our lands.

**Emergency Grazing Assistance:** In response to 2020 wildfires, WDFW offered three emergency grazing permits to non-Department permittees and was able to offer an alternate to one of our own permittees whose allotment burned. All permits were in Okanogan County. This is more assistance than offered by any other public land manager despite WDFW having the smallest land ownership across Washington.

**Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP):** WDFW is leading the [Southwest Washington Small Forest Lands Conservation Partnership RCPP](#), collaborating with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), DNR, the Conservation Commission, eight conservation districts, and WSU Extension. To date the CDs and DNR have completed 43 forest stewardship plans that make producers eligible for NRCS financial assistance. WSU Extension's outreach and education efforts have reached over 1,050 landowners representing over 27,000 acres. The partners and NRCS held an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) signup in June 2020 that provided \$208,824 to help seven forest landowners improve forest health, fish and wildlife habitat, and water quality. WDFW is a partner in several other RCPP efforts in Washington.

**Water Resource Inventory Area (WRIA) 1 Salmon Recovery & Water Quality RCPP:** WDFW also has an active role in the WRIA 1 Salmon Recovery & Water Quality RCPP partnering with Whatcom Conservation District. Through this agreement partners work with producers to replace culverts on farm access roads,



## Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife 2020 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts

restoring fish passage in agricultural and rural areas; work with Tribes to construct instream wooden structures to provide habitat for salmon; and integrate and publicize NRCS programs in rural, agricultural and Tribal communities.

**Shared Stewardship Strategy:** On May 8, 2019, the State of Washington signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Pacific Northwest Region of the United States Forest Service on Shared Stewardship. Through the MOU, the Washington Departments of Natural Resources and Fish and Wildlife, along with the Service, established a framework to work collaboratively to accomplish mutual goals, further common interests, and respond to the increasing suite of challenges facing communities, landscapes, and natural and cultural resources of the State of Washington. The MOU among these three agencies is the foundation for future collaboration with tribal partners, local governments, conservation districts, other state and federal agencies, and non-governmental groups. The intent is to collectively focus investments on land management in areas with promise to achieve the greatest benefits. The agencies will work on a landscape scale to effectively manage risks while improving forest and rangeland health and productivity, enhancing scenic stability, reducing hazardous fuels, conserving fish and wildlife resources, providing recreational opportunities, sustaining cultural resources and providing for the health, prosperity, and enjoyment of our communities and visitors. WDFW is currently in the process of hiring a Shared Stewardship position to coordinate the implementation of the MOU internally and externally. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/news/state-federal-agencies-align-historic-partnership-reduce-wildfire-risk-and-improve-forests>

**Hydraulic Code Rulemaking:** In May 2020, WDFW completed rule amendments to implement the hydraulic code elements of 2SHB 1579 - a bill passed by the legislature during the 2019 legislative session. This bill implements recommendations of the Southern Resident orca task force (task force) related to increasing Chinook abundance. The bill enhances authority for WDFW's civil compliance program. A major emphasis of the civil compliance program will be to ensure applicants know how to comply with the hydraulic code through the education and technical assistance we provide when we advise and consult on permits, conduct inspections, and perform on-site technical visits. The bill also adds a procedure for potential applicants to request a pre-application determination about whether a project requires a hydraulic project approval (HPA) and repeals a statute relating to bank protection in saltwater areas for single-family residences. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/regulations/2020>

**Brian Abbott Fish Barrier Removal Board (FBRB) Cooperation with Conservation Districts:** Conservation districts have been strong partners with the FBRB. Districts identify fish passage barriers, provide technical assistance, connect landowners with grant programs and in many instances serve as the project sponsor for fish passage projects. Over the last two biennia, CDs have served as the project sponsors for 19 percent of all FBRB fish passage project grants. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/advisory/fbrb>

**Fish Screening:** In 2020, WDFW provided technical assistance for fish screening projects to a wide variety of water users in our agricultural community, successfully collaborating with our Conservation District partners on many of these projects. Of special note was the progress made toward bolstering the fish screening education and outreach in Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, and King counties resulting in improved communication with CDs and helping to protect juvenile Chinook salmon, a primary food source for Southern Resident killer whales. As has been the case historically, fish screening work in Eastern Washington continues to make progress with notable successes by the Yakima Tributary Access & Habitat Program (YTAHP). In 2020, WDFW, Kittitas County Conservation District, and North Yakima Conservation District worked collaboratively





## Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife 2020 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts

through YTAHP to restore fish passage into 2.5 miles of tributary habitat and compliantly screen 6,009.2 acre-feet of diverted water for irrigation through eight projects in the Yakima Basin.

**Wildfires:** The wildfires of 2020 in central and eastern Washington took a toll on wildlife habitat. Three WDFW wildlife area units burned completely while portions of several other wildlife areas burned. WDFW is still assessing damage, but we estimate about 90,000 acres of WDFW-managed lands burned causing concerns for greater sage-grouse, Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit and other species. However, all is not lost. Native vegetation is already greening-up in some of the burned areas. WDFW is working with CDs, the Conservation Commission, other state and federal agencies and nongovernmental organizations to assess wildfire damage and develop short-term and long-term recovery actions across public and private land ownerships. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/wdfw-lands/wildfire>.

**WDFW 25-Year Strategic Plan:** In 2019 WDFW began developing a 25-year strategic plan to help guide department work with partners, policy, and funding decisions. WDFW gathered feedback from a diverse range of stakeholders, partners, and employees while developing the plan. In October 2020, the FWC approved the 25-Year Strategic Plan. The plan is a living document and the department intends to revisit as needed to proactively address conservation challenges, engage communities through recreation and stewardship, deliver science that informs Washington's most pressing fish and wildlife questions, and move WDFW toward operational and environmental excellence. More information at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/about/administration/strategic-planning>.

**Cooperation with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS):** WDFW and NRCS are continuing their working relationship through contribution agreements to work on fish passage, screening and habitat projects; and wildlife habitat through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). WDFW and NRCS have a mutual interest in helping to bring about the conservation and wise use of land, water, wildlife, and related resources. They have a mutual interest in ensuring that NRCS Farm Bill programs are effectively implemented and address conservation priorities. Both NRCS and WDFW desire to make the best technical assistance available to land users and to encourage participation in the various USDA financial incentives offered under the Farm Bill conservation programs. To avoid duplication of effort, improve communication, and to streamline the delivery of technical assistance to the land user, both parties have agreed to cooperate by assigning certain tasks in the delivery of technical assistance to each agency. Accelerated delivery of technical and administrative assistance through funding provided by these agreements will increase staff resources and enhance fish and wildlife habitat and associated natural resources.

**State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE):** WDFW's private lands biologists continued to provide technical assistance to farmers enrolled in the SAFE initiative of CRP. Farmers have enrolled over 111,300 acres in SAFE in Washington, with nearly 73,000 acres in Douglas County, home to the core populations of state threatened greater sage-grouse, state endangered sharp-tailed grouse, and federally endangered Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit. Unfortunately, the efforts and partnerships formed through SAFE were recently hindered by changes to the initiative. First, the 2018 Farm Bill struck the broad waiver language that allowed a county's cropland acreage enrolled in CRP to exceed 25 percent and makes only Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) eligible for this waiver. Now in counties, like Douglas County, FSA cannot offer a CRP signup until enough contracts expire to get under the 25 percent county cropland acreage cap which will take two to three years. Second, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) made a discretionary decision to move SAFE whole field practices from Continuous CRP to General CRP. Now producers can only offer acres during the annual general signup through a competitive process rather than the past non-competitive continuous signup, and financial incentives are greatly reduced. WDFW partnered with Conservation Northwest and Foster Creek CD to



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### **2020 Issue Highlights Report to the Washington Association of Conservation Districts**

identify ways in which to highlight that these changes limit the viability of SAFE and could also impact voluntary conservation efforts in the county. In June 2020, agricultural producers in Douglas County volunteered to speak about the importance of CRP and its SAFE initiative to wildlife conservation and their local economy as well as the consequences of the above changes in a video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8uGCMqnYeY>.