

Minutes of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council Meeting

March 11, 2009

Natural Resources Building, Room 172

1111 Washington Street SE

Olympia, Washington

10:05 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

Approved: June 10, 2009

Voting members present by telephone: Alan Black, Peter Dunwiddie, Janelle Downs, Cherie Kearney, Bob Meier, Cheryl Schultz, Merrill Peterson, Wade Troutman. Ex-Officio members present: Stephen Saunders for the Department of Natural Resources, Elizabeth Rodrick for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Jim Eychaner for the Recreation and Conservation Office, and, by phone, Rob Fimbel for the State Parks and Recreation Commission

Members absent: Jeanne Koenings for the Department of Ecology

DNR staff present: Pene Speaks, John Gamon, Curt Pavola, Anna Jones, Princess Jackson-Smith, Michele Zukerberg

I. Introductions

Chair Black called the conference call meeting to order and everyone identified themselves. There being no quorum immediately present, the Minutes were tabled until a quorum was reached, and the Council began with Old Business.

II. Minutes of the January 14, 2009, Meeting of the Council

After a quorum was reached, Chair Black called for a motion regarding the Minutes of the previous meeting. Meier moved and Downs seconded that the Minutes of the January 14, 2009, Meeting of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council be approved. The motion passed unanimously.

III. Old Business

Important Bird Area Update

Gamon led a discussion regarding the Natural Heritage Program's progress on Important Bird Area (IBA) work. He referred Council members to a document prepared by Don McIvor that was made available via e-mail prior to the Council meeting. Gamon began by explaining the maps for the Humptulips Important Bird Area (IBA). In these maps, McIvor mapped the existing North Bay Natural Area Preserve together with the Humptulips IBA. He also added various bird and other wildlife data to the map. The result shows the diversity of species and ecosystems values present within the combined NAP/IBA. Gamon indicated that such an exercise is informative for DNR as we identify new natural areas or consider expansion of existing natural areas and that it can also be informative for Audubon in their delineation of IBAs.

There was additional discussion regarding the Natural Heritage Program (NHP) and NHAC roles and responsibilities in light of the RCW language (RCW 79.70.110 and 79.70.120), which refers to 'recognition' of IBAs. Gamon and Speaks indicated that additional work is needed to clarify what 'recognition' means. They will work with Don McIvor between now and the June NHAC meeting. At the June meeting, NHP staff will present a recommendation regarding the process and two IBA 'recognition' proposals to the NHAC.

Originally, Audubon had 52 IBAs, but now there are 60-70. Speaks indicated that DNR's willingness and interest in managing IBA data is predicated on ensuring a level of scientific rigor and credibility regarding the data.

Saunders cautioned the Council to be very clear about what a "boundary" for an IBA would mean, in particular regarding issues such as public access and the intent (or not) to pursue acquisition.

June Meeting Agenda Development

Speaks said that as a follow-up to the discussion in January, and in conversation with Kearney, we would like to use the June meeting as a time to discuss natural areas that are:

- externally driven – how to respond
- science driven – guiding principles
- have factors of design,

and for policy level discussion of:

- tax issues
- private land ownership
- public access (hunting)
- tiered land protection
- working lands
- buffers.

We should consider how different pieces of information are used in the Council's deliberation and decision-making regarding natural areas. Speaks said we will revisit the RCWs including the statutory authority, etc., of the Council. Rodrick suggested including NRCAs in the discussion, especially those externally nominated, and review the statutes on them, also. Kearney recommended boundary size as a topic – how big and why, including land use and ownership issues, and what our role is. Speaks said we had identified other topics, and she would like to have a lead person identified for each topic. Kearney and Rodrick suggested that Meier might facilitate a discussion about forestry uses and recent regulations on riparian easements, including endangered species habitat and how it relates to the Natural Heritage Plan.

Fimbel recommended a discussion about criteria used in NAP/NRCA determination. Saunders said that when DNR brings a Trust Land Transfer proposal to the Board of Natural Resources (BNR) and the Commissioner, the difference between an NAP and an NRCA frequently is not clear.

Pavola suggested that a discussion item be whether all NAP buffer areas be NRCA status – why or why not? There was discussion about how to proceed with the facilitation of the various issues. Black encapsulated them as: 1) NAP/NRCA designation, 2) public access issues, 3) working forest/tax issues or landscape/land uses. It seemed to be the consensus that staff would identify topic areas then reach out to Council members for input and planning. Rodrick expressed interest in developing policies so that repeated revisiting of issues is not necessary. Speaks will send the lists of topics to Council members.

IV. New Business

Organization Update

Speaks explained that with the new Commissioner of Public Lands, Peter Goldmark, there have been changes in the organizational structure at DNR. There is now a Department Supervisor who reports directly to the Commissioner, and three Deputy Supervisors – Uplands, Regulatory Programs, Aquatics and Agency Resources – reporting to the Department Supervisor. Lenny Young, formerly the Division Manager of the Forest Practices Division, is the new Department Supervisor. The Region Managers and the Public Disclosure and Records Officers also now report directly to the Department Supervisor.

Natural Areas and Natural Heritage Programs are now within the Land Management Division, under Gretchen Nicholas, Division Manager. Land Management has many scientists and seems to be a good fit for Natural Areas/Natural Heritage. Stephen Saunders, Division Manager of the restructured Asset Management and Recreation Division, will probably be replaced by Nicholas as the Ex-Officio Member for the Department of Natural Resources on the Council. The acting Uplands Deputy Supervisor is Clay Sprague.

Budget

Speaks said the department will be going through a reduction-in-force (RIF), especially as timber sales and aquatic leases are bringing in less revenue. There was discussion of the percentage reductions expected in the agencies. The cut to the General Fund may be as high as 25%. Fimbel indicated State Parks expects a 23% cut in their General Fund monies.

NHAC Membership – See Other Business

Stavis NRCA Draft Management Plan

Zuckerberg indicated that there is a Draft Management Plan for the Stavis Natural Resources Conservation Area (NRCA), and the restoration process is now in the plan, including a reference to shellfish habitat on conservation areas. Stavis NRCA was designated in 2004. The proposed area of Stavis is about 4,000 acres with about 1,500 acres managed by DNR as natural area, including the adjacent 645-acre Kitsap Forest Natural Area Preserve. Last year, we began the management planning process, and held a public meeting with about 100 people in February of this year. The main concerns from the public were environmental management, co-existing, necessary-to-no vehicle traffic, and legal issues around access and easements. This final concern is being addressed by Kelly Heintz along with DNR's rights-of-way and region engineering programs. The draft is just now out for internal review and then will go out for stakeholder review. Zuckerberg will hold another public hearing on the plan. The Council asked to see the final draft document.

The Plan will be presented at the June meeting of the Council. Copies will be distributed prior to the meeting. Pavola reviewed the Council's role: the Council reviews NRCA plans but does not formally approve them as with NAP plans. The NRCA plan goes through SEPA and comments are sent, along with a recommended final plan, to the Commissioner of Public Lands for review and approval. There was discussion about the hunting issue. Saunders said he believed the new recreation rules would be adequate to cover that issue.

Zuckerberg said the most recent purchase was the 120-acre Erehwon Tree Farm (Michel Property), with a shoreline bulkhead and channelized stream. Restoration funding is available for work on

the uplands behind the bulkhead, and she is hoping for funding next year for pulling the bulkhead and restoring the stream hydrology. There was discussion of possible funding sources.

Zukerberg also said that there was the issue of shellfish properties. One parcel is 5 acres of tidelands, and she has had conversation with Tribes about harvesting.

V. Agency Reports

Recreation and Conservation Office

Eychaner reported that RCO staff is coordinating the state's application for federal stimulus money from NOAA, money directed to activities that support salmon recovery. The "Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group" is planning a workshop on April 29 to discuss tools used to set priorities for land acquisition; DNR's Pene Speaks is a key participant. In budget discussions, motor boat interests are discussing transferring capital dollars from the Boating Facilities Program to State Parks for operating costs next biennium.

Department of Ecology

No report available.

State Parks and Recreation Commission

Fimbel said that some of his report on budget was in the previous discussion. State Parks is looking at 10-23% cuts, with loss of staff, potential transfer of parks out of the system, mothballing some parks (and how to care for the resources and potential degradation in doing that). They are applying for U. S. Forest Service and NOAA grants. The State Parks and Recreation Commission has new Commissioners coming on board. Their structure is changing with their Puget Sound Region being absorbed into the other three regions.

Department of Fish and Wildlife

Rodrick said that there are big changes coming to WDFW. The acting Director is Phil Anderson. There are several bills before the legislature to restructure the Fish and Wildlife Commission and its duties. The one that passed out of the Senate is a proposal to limit the commission to five members with the Governor appointing the director.

Rodrick indicated that WDFW expects a 23% reduction in budget and has already begun the RIF process. Letters have been sent to those with jobs at risk. She said that both General Fund and hunting and fishing monies were cut, but primarily General Fund. They expect to reduce by 120 FTEs (full time equivalents) in staff to start, and there will probably be more. Her Wildlife Diversity Division will have 3-4 FTEs cut, so they are re-prioritizing activities.

WDFW is co-leading a project with the Washington State Department of Transportation on habitat connectivity over public and private lands. It involves a coalition of non-governmental organizations and state agencies; Gamon and Josh Halofsky are working on the project from DNR. The project team hopes to have a map by the end of the year. The main emphasis is on modeling connectivity for focal species that represent larger groups and habitat types. They want to look at an ecoregional version next year. Gamon said that he and John Pierce are on the science team exploring other approaches. Dunwiddie asked if there was danger of the program being cut. Rodrick replied that the WDFW biologist and GIS analyst are funded through June, and they are working on getting funds for next fiscal year. WSDOT and The Nature Conservancy are also looking for funding. An information sheet is attached; the web page is not yet available.

Department of Natural Resources

Given previously as part of Organization Update.

VI. Natural Areas Program Report

No report, except that the Chehalis River Surge Plain Management Plan has gone to the Legislature, as required by a budget proviso.

VII. Natural Heritage Program Report

Gamon reported that the 2009 *Natural Heritage Plan* is at the printer now, and will be sent to the appropriate legislative committees and to the Council as soon as we receive it from the printer. It is an eight-page document. The 2007 *Natural Heritage Plan*, with all of the details regarding how priorities are established and how the program manages information, will remain available on the DNR website. The lists of priority elements, updated for 2009, are also available on-line.

VII. Other Business

Speaks received an e-mail from Roger Hoesterey explaining his need to resign from the Council. He is now the director for the entire western U. S. for The Trust for Public Land, and feels he does not have the time needed to devote to a position on the Council. This now vacant position is an at-large position. We still have a scientist position vacant, also. Please forward recommendations and questions to Speaks.

Speaks has also sent information to the new Commissioner of Public Lands explaining the past process of nominating and appointing members of the Council. At the end of June, both Bob Meier's and Merrill Peterson's terms expire. We are waiting for guidance from the Commissioner.

Speaks confirmed that we are still on schedule for the June 10-11, 2009, meeting with a field trip to Cypress Island.

The meeting adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

Attachment: Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Working Group information sheet

Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Working Group

To promote the long-term viability of wildlife populations in Washington State through a science-based, collaborative approach that identifies opportunities and priorities to conserve and restore habitat connectivity.

Summary

Washington State has a great diversity of wildlife and natural habitats. Many wildlife populations in Washington are threatened by the loss of connectivity between populations that results from human-imposed barriers to movement, while the added threat of climate change significantly increases the urgency of protecting and restoring habitat connectivity to enhance the capacity of wildlife species to adapt to changing conditions and shifting habitats.

Protecting and restoring landscape features that allow animals to move at a variety of scales safely across the landscape is essential to ensure the long term viability of wildlife populations throughout the state.

There are many threats to wildlife populations that are the direct result of human-imposed barriers to movement. There are also many opportunities to avoid the creation of barriers, restore existing ones, and protect permeable landscapes. To address these opportunities requires the coordinated efforts of many different partners. A coordinated approach to conservation planning, land acquisition and management, wildlife management and research, as well as land use, infrastructure and transportation planning will be essential.



Photo by Mark Skatrud. Lynx tracks in the Okanogan

An iterative and coordinated terrestrial Washington State Habitat Connectivity Plan is needed to synthesize information and facilitate cooperation for the identification of opportunities to protect and restore well-connected landscapes across the state of Washington. The plan will result in living documents to be revisited in the future to reflect changing conditions in our state over time. The first plan, at the statewide scale, will include assessment of current conditions and will result in contextual maps that identify priority areas to maintain or improve landscape connectivity between important core habitat areas in our state. At the ecoregional scales to follow, the plans will include maps built upon both science and dialogue among local communities that identify the best places to invest resources to conserve or restore native plant communities situated between important core habitat areas. These locations can be viewed as connectivity opportunity areas, because they have a high likelihood of facilitating wildlife movements from one habitat block to the next.

Who?

- The Core Team is made up of representatives from The Nature Conservancy, Conservation Northwest, USFS, USFWS, University of Washington, Western Transportation Institute, Biodiversity Council, WDNR, WDFW, and WSDOT.
- The Core Team is supported by Science and Communications Subcommittees, and external review panels.
- Public input is critical in the interpretation, validation, and any potential implementation of the connectivity opportunities identified from our science based modeling.

Building on Current Efforts

- Strong integration with the WA Wildlife Action Plans.
- Complimenting and building upon the goals and visions of the Ecoregional Assessments, WA Biodiversity Conservation Strategy, and USDA Forest Service's National Forest Plan Revisions.
- Recognition of strong regional policy support for wildlife connectivity from the Western Governors' Association.

Further Details of the WA Habitat Connectivity Working Group

Project Timeline

Our goal is to complete a Washington State Statewide Habitat Connectivity Plan December 2009. The Core Team has met to design a scientific process since late 2007. Review panels, species specific expert workshops, and public engagement will occur during 2009.

A full Washington State Habitat Connectivity Plan that incorporates both ecoregional and statewide level analysis by Winter 2011.

Project Product

This Washington State Habitat Connectivity Plan will be multi-scaled in both geography and time, beginning with a coarse scale assessment of current conditions across the state, to be followed by finer scale assessments at the ecoregional scale. The plan will evaluate patterns of vegetation, topography, land use, wildlife species' distributions, and other factors to identify and prioritize connectivity opportunity areas. All plans will include narratives and maps produced through scientific modeling of habitat quality and connectivity for a selected set of species that represent the diversity of habitats in Washington and the risk factors for wildlife.

The plan will also provide baseline information and an analysis approach that can be applied to predict impacts on connectivity resulting from future land use and climate change scenarios. The plan will result in living documents to be revisited in the future to reflect changing conditions in our state over time.

Project Benefits

Synthesizing information into one science based connectivity plan has many benefits, including:

- Coordination of conservation investments on landscapes that multiple partners are working within.
- Prioritizing areas within our state for protection of connectivity areas that already provide high quality safe passage for wildlife from one habitat to another, and for restoration of areas that are not functioning properly.



- *Safe passage for wildlife in our state is critical to ensure that we maintain the diversity of animals that call our state home.*
- *A science based plan to highlight opportunities for protecting and restoring connectivity in our state is needed to compliment existing efforts.*

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