



AQUATIC LANDS HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN

Improving the health of Puget Sound and Washington's rivers, lakes, and other marine areas

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is steward of more than 2.6 million acres of land beneath our state's navigable lakes, rivers, marine waters, and estuaries. DNR sustainably manages these aquatic lands on behalf of the people of Washington—to protect fish and wildlife and to provide opportunities for commerce, navigation, and public access.

Healthy waters are paramount to the people of Washington—and to DNR. The state's aquatic lands are a critical resource for maintaining healthy habitat for wildlife. These lands are also the foundation of our economy, quality of life, and the natural heritage we will pass on to generations to come.

The population of Washington State is predicted to increase by 2 million people by 2020. Demand for access and use of aquatic lands will only increase. This demand places enormous pressure on the marine and freshwater habitats that support diverse species of wildlife and plants.



Eelgrass provides critical habitat for salmon, forage fish, and other species. Its presence—or absence—can be a key indicator of environmental health.

Planning for a Better Future for Aquatic Lands

To address this demand and associated impacts to aquatic habitat and species, DNR began developing an Aquatic Lands **Habitat Conservation Plan** (HCP) in 2005 to provide a framework for sustainably managing the aquatic lands under DNR's stewardship.

By taking this proactive approach to land management, DNR will be in a position to better care for the state's natural aquatic environment and improve its management of these lands. An HCP will help us protect species that have been identified as particularly sensitive to environmental threats, or at some risk of extinction under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). The plan will also help us prevent species from being listed in the first place.

Building on Sound Science

The Aquatic Lands HCP under development is the product of seven years of research and analysis. The plan is based on more than 2,000 references, including 1,400 peer-reviewed articles. We used this information to develop the scope of the plan and to quantify the potential impacts addressed in the draft HCP. All of this work has been done with the input of a broad range of scientists, industry experts, tribal representatives, conservation organizations, and agency representatives. Throughout the process, we worked closely with the Federal Services (National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) as we investigated conservation options.

Habitat conservation plans emphasize conservation through long-term protection and sustainable management of the ecosystems wildlife depend on. An HCP is one of the tools that DNR uses to manage existing uses and future activities on Washington's state-owned aquatic lands.

The proposed Aquatic Lands HCP will help protect Puget Sound, our river systems, and other state-owned aquatic lands statewide by guiding management activities that:

- Avoid or minimize adverse impacts to species that are protected under the ESA.
- Provide long-term certainty and stability for those who lease aquatic lands from DNR.
- Provide habitat mitigation or 'compensation' for unavoidable impacts through either correcting the impact or restoring other, similar, habitat nearby.
- Preserve the economic and recreation benefits derived from the use of state-owned aquatic lands.



State-owned aquatic lands provide tremendous opportunities for public access. Photo: Jason Goldstein, DNR.

Once approved, the Aquatic Lands HCP will raise the bar for environmental protection on state-owned aquatic lands.

HCP next steps

In the spirit of inclusive and transparent decision-making, the collaborative process for developing the HCP continues with the following steps:

- In the fall of 2012, DNR submitted a **draft HCP for review** to the Federal Services (US Fish & Wildlife Service and NOAA Marine Fisheries)
- Once the Services have approved the draft, DNR will seek input from interested parties during the **final phase** of developing the draft.
- In 2013, DNR will also begin the **formal public review process** through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Learn more about the Aquatic Lands HCP

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