

LANDLINE

A Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife land management newsletter

Winter/Spring 2008

Changing use brings change in rules

By Jeff Koenings, Ph.D., WDFW Director

For decades, wildlife areas owned and managed by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) have provided virtually unbridled access to the great outdoors.

There is something very appealing about having natural areas available in our state to hunt, fish, camp and observe nature without the encumbrance of rules and regulations.

So it's not surprising that some people were concerned when the department began drafting public conduct rules for WDFW wildlife areas and water access sites several years ago.

One thing was certain from the outset of the process—it was never our intention to restrict responsible use of these lands. Rather, the conduct rules approved by the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission last December are aimed at protecting these areas from activities that threaten their value as wildlife habitat and sites for sustainable public recreation.

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New public conduct rules now in effect on WDFW lands

New rules about camping, building blinds, target shooting and many other activities on Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) lands are now in effect.

The complete public conduct rule package is available on WDFW's website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wac232/>.

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 232-13 in December after years of discussion and revision. Extensive public review initially entailed work with WDFW's statewide Land Management Advisory Council and individual wildlife area citizen advisory groups. Review also included mailings to over 1,400 individuals and organizations, and taking the rules through the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) public review process.

Although some of the rules had already been on the books, the new WAC chapter compiles them in one place for easy public reference.

"We will be posting signs about the rules on our lands," said WDFW wildlife area program manager Paul Dahmer, "but we can refer folks to the complete chapter of rules rather than just depending on individual area signs to inform them."

The new rules were initiated to address an increase in the types of recreation and number of people using WDFW properties, Dahmer explained.

Following WDFW's dual mandate, most WDFW wildlife areas are acquired first to protect fish and wildlife and their habitat, and second to provide public fish and

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Dr. Jeff Koenings, Ph.D, Director
Jennifer Quan, Lands Division Manager
Margaret Ainscough, Public Affairs Director
Madonna Luers, Newsletter Editor
luersmel@dfw.wa.gov



Quan named new Lands Division manager

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has named Jennifer Quan its new Lands Division manager.

Quan, who has 14 years of experience in natural resource management, has been serving as acting division manager since former manager Mark Quinn retired last fall.

Quan started work at WDFW in 2006 as the project manager for the wildlife areas Habitat Conservation Plan (see story on page 3). From 2000 to 2006 she worked as a fish and wildlife biologist liaison between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Washington State Department of Transportation, serving on and leading teams to implement the Endangered Species Act and other environmental regulatory requirements for a wide range of large scale transportation projects.

Quan has also worked as a marine mammal biologist for Cascadia Research Collective, a research assistant for the National Marine Fisheries Service, a teaching assistant at the University of Washington, and a wildlife biologist

for both public and private entities in Washington and California.

Quan has a bachelor of science degree from Evergreen State College and a master's degree in marine affairs from the University of Washington.

"I'm very pleased with Jennifer stepping up to this leadership position in our Lands Division," said WDFW Wildlife Assistant Director Dave Brittell. "Her work on the wildlife areas habitat conservation plan alone shows that she brings many talents and skills to this job. But her ability to juggle everything from grazing issues to new acquisition processes as acting manager really proved she's up to the tasks ahead."

Quan says the challenges and many opportunities to advance conservation in WDFW land management are most appealing to her.

"Conserving our natural landscapes for our children and the species that rely on them are of great value to me," Quan said. "I'm also looking forward to expanding the partnerships I've



Jennifer Quan
Lands Division Manager

promoted throughout my career to include our wildlife area neighbors and users, and to work in coordination with other public and private landowners toward fish and wildlife conservation."

Wenatchee River access site closed to commercial use

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has closed one of its popular Wenatchee River access sites in Chelan County to commercial use.

The lower Monitor access site, northwest of Wenatchee and just west of the town of Monitor near a county park, has become so congested in the summer with commercial river running trips that it becomes unusable for others and potentially unsafe.

WDFW lands agent Terrie Preston of Ephrata explained the quarter-acre primitive site has very limited parking space, no developed boat ramp, and no trash collection or toilet facilities. When large commercial rafting and kayaking groups use the site simultaneously, it becomes so crowded that individual non-commercial fishers and boaters are unable to use it.

"The crowded conditions are also a safety concern," Preston said, "so from a liability standpoint alone we need to reduce use until we can expand and improve the site."

Preston noted WDFW is seeking grant funding to improve the facilities at the lower Monitor site, although acquisition of additional shoreline property is not an option at this time.

How much land does WDFW manage?

As of January 1, 2008, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) manages 806,701 acres statewide.

WDFW currently owns a total of 549,164 acres in wildlife areas, fishing access sites, fish hatcheries, and administrative sites.

WDFW also manages 257,536 acres under agreements with the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In addition, WDFW co-manages mitigation properties with the Bonneville Power Administration and Tacoma City Light.

Compared to the last tally relayed here in 2004, the total acreage owned is about 38,000 acres higher and the total acreage managed is about 59,000 acres lower.

That reflects new acquisitions and relinquishment of DNR-leased lands, some of which will be acquired in the ongoing WDFW-DNR land exchange.

Update: Habitat Conservation Plan for wildlife areas

Development of the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for state wildlife areas is now in the third year of an anticipated six-year project.

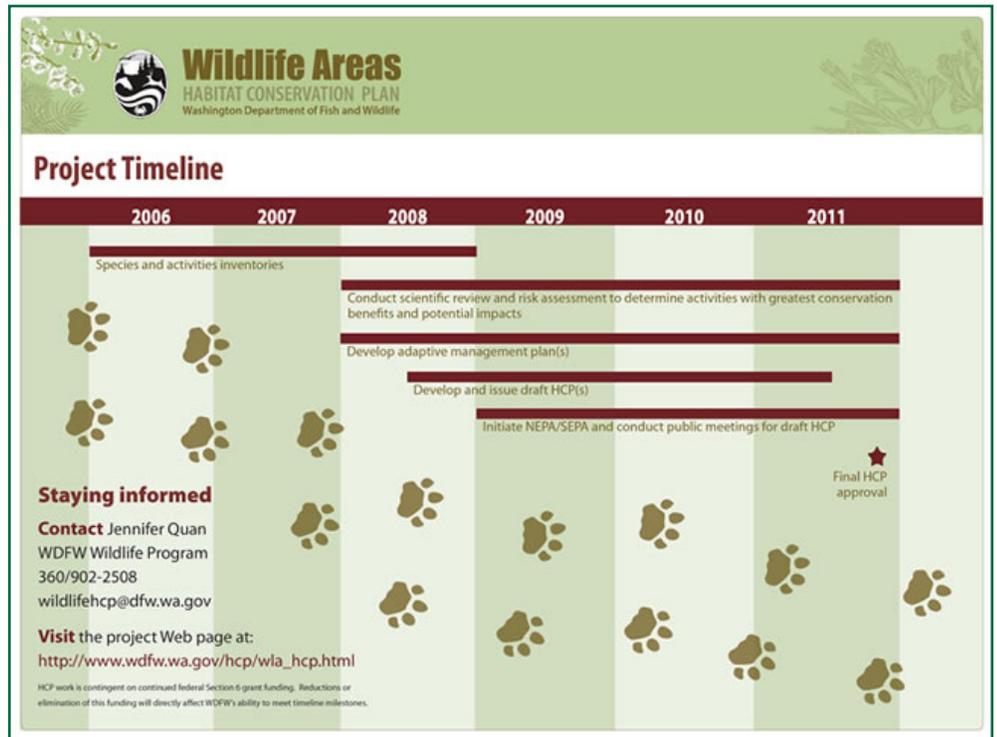
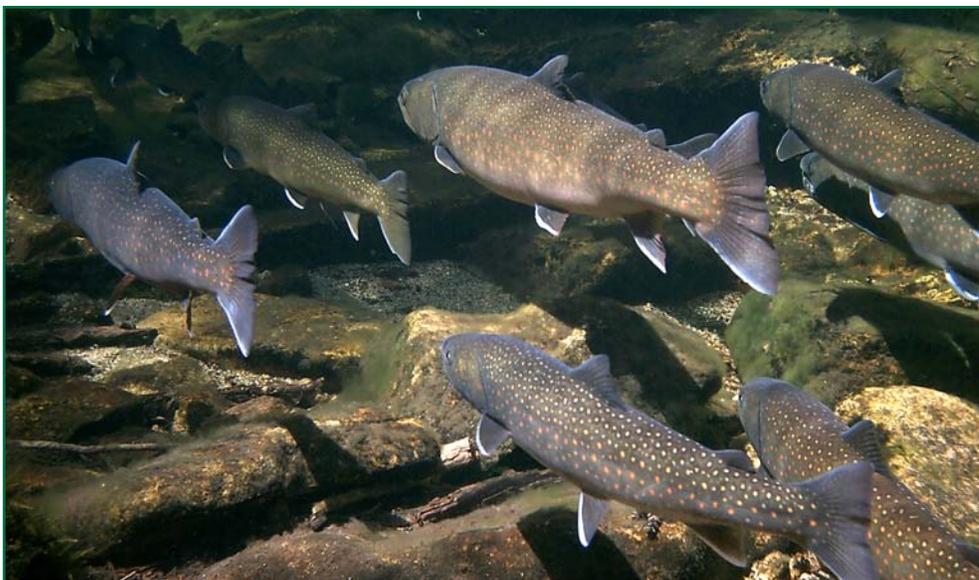
An HCP is a long-term plan designed to provide certainty that approved activities meet federal species protection requirements. For more than a decade, HCPs have been developed by both private and public landowners across the country to both ensure compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and allow use of lands without legal problems.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) HCP will be a 30 to 50-year plan addressing both federal and state ESA-listed species that could be affected by recreation and land management activities that occur on wildlife areas.

Initial HCP exploration was funded in 2006 in part with a \$544,000 grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). Most work to date has focused on inventories of at-risk species and wildlife area activities, from operations and maintenance to public recreation, along with mapping data collection and database development.

WDFW Lands Division Manager Jennifer Quan reports that inventories have been completed for wildlife areas in the Northcentral and North Puget

Bull trout



Sound regions. Another USFWS grant of \$575,000 (with a 25 percent state match) was awarded this year to help cover costs of inventorying wildlife areas in the Eastern and Southwest regions of the state.

"This year our HCP team will also begin an initial assessment of data collected last year in our Northcentral and North Puget Sound regions to determine what species and activities should be forwarded on for further analysis," Quan

said. "This phase will also include a scientific peer review process."

WDFW is requesting \$666,900 in a federal grant for 2009 to complete inventories in the Southcentral and Coastal regions, and to support development of the overall plan and the National Environmental Policy Act process and documents required.

As promised, the HCP process to date has involved the general public. WDFW conducted informational public meetings across the state in April and May of 2007 about both the wildlife area HCP and the Hydraulic Project Approval HCP (which covers proposed activities in and near water to ensure fish and shellfish and their habitat is protected.) Public outreach will continue this year and next with individual Wildlife Area Citizen Advisory Groups and Land Management, Game, and Wildlife Diversity Advisory Councils.

WDFW is also coordinating the HCP development with tribes, conducting government-to-government meetings with five responding tribes to date.

More information on the HCP development process is available on the WDFW website at <http://www.wdfw.wa.gov/hcp/index.html>.

Washington's Wildlife Areas: Mt. St. Helens

The 2,744-acre Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area in northeastern Cowlitz County is one of the most observed state wildlife areas in Washington because of its proximity to national monument visitor centers and the landscape's unique history.

The volcanic eruption of Mt. St. Helens on May 18, 1980 dramatically changed the vegetation and wildlife of the area. The ash, debris and mudflows from the blast buried everything in their path and initially left a lifeless moonscape for miles.

For several years after the eruption, efforts centered on salvaging blown down timber and preventing further damage. To prevent silt from moving downstream and causing flooding in the Longview/Kelso area and clogging Columbia River shipping channels, a grass/legume seed mix was aerially applied to the bare soils left by the mudflows.

The establishment of this new vegetation almost immediately attracted wandering elk. Without major re-planting of trees for lumber production, the area became a grazing haven for elk herds rebounding from the blast.

The wildlife area was established for management of elk winter range in 1990 when the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) acquired 2,533 acres along the North Fork Toutle River from the Weyerhaeuser Company through a land exchange made possible by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. WDFW traded two parcels in Cowlitz and Yakima counties for 2,212 acres and Weyerhaeuser donated the additional 321 acres. Additional elk winter range was acquired from Weyerhaeuser with Elk Foundation help in 1996.

At the time of the mudflow seeding, a temporary dam was built on the Toutle River to help slow and trap some of the downstream movement of silt while a larger permanent structure was designed and built. Because the sediment retention structure provided no fish passage, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers funded a fish collection facility



Peaceful Mt. St. Helens, 2004
Jim Cummins photo

downstream where migrating fish were trapped and trucked upstream to spawn.

The land for the structure and sediment retention area was condemned through the Washington Department of Transportation (DOT) with the intent of transferring management to WDFW later. WDFW and DOT real estate staffs are both working on the transfer, which will include approximately 4,000 acres west of the existing wildlife area.

The 110,330-acre Mt. St. Helens National Volcanic Monument was established in 1982 to protect the area's distinctive features for research, interpretation, and recreation. The monument, mostly in Skamania County, adjoins the wildlife area to the east. Access is restricted in many parts of the monument to allow studies of natural regeneration in the blast zone, including the portion adjacent to the wildlife area.

To develop the recreational and interpretive components of the monument, state highway 504, also known as the Spirit Lake Highway, was reconstructed. Five public and private interpretive visitor centers have been developed along this route, two that

overlook the wildlife area. Thousands of visitors watch elk and other wildlife from these vantage points every year.

The Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area is bordered by Weyerhaeuser lands on the north and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) lands to the south – both which replanted blast-impacted acreage with trees and currently manage for commercial timber production. Because of that reforestation, WDFW's initial wildlife area management plan focused primarily on maintaining and enhancing elk winter forage, which was then considered to be the limiting factor for the population.

Brian Calkins, who had been working at other WDFW facilities since 1985, was hired in 1992 to manage the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area, along with the 1,550-acre Shillapoo-Vancouver Lake Wildlife Area and over a dozen smaller satellite units totaling nearly 1,200 acres scattered throughout Cowlitz, Clark, Skamania and Wahkiakum counties in southwest Washington.

Sixteen years later, Calkins is still spread that thin. It was not until 2006 that an assistant manager was hired who

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Washington's Wildlife Areas: Mt. St. Helens *cont. from page 4*

works primarily on the Shillapoo Wildlife Area.

"Staffing and funding are perennial issues for our land management," Calkins said, "so we're really grateful for volunteers and donations from the Elk Foundation and other private groups. Every major project we have accomplished at Mt. St. Helens has involved volunteer labor or outside funding."

Calkins' original work on the wildlife area was mostly weed control, especially of scotch-broom, which persistently competes with elk forage. But then came the floods of 1996 and 1997 that shifted Toutle River channels, eroded hundreds of acres of the original mudflow that was a productive elk winter foraging area, and left extensive gravel bars void of vegetation.

Calkins recalls this major change coincided with the closing of the canopy on the adjoining commercial forestlands, which also resulted in a major loss of elk forage production. Then followed the somewhat severe winter of 1998-99 that ultimately reshaped management and public interest in the wildlife area.

"We lost at least 79 elk that winter on the wildlife area," he said. "We had a lot of

calls from people wanting us to suddenly start feeding the animals but we knew it was too late for feeding to do any good that year. Similarly, very late during the winter of 2005-06, we had a severe storm that suddenly increased winter elk mortality, both on the wildlife area and surrounding lands. But again, feeding at

a late date like that would have been of no benefit."

The attention Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area received in 1999 ultimately helped develop long-term volunteer support and some private funding for restoration

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Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area manager Brian Calkins feeds elk



Wintering elk

Washington's Wildlife Areas: Mt. St. Helens *cont. from page 5*



Western toad tadpoles

of forage vegetation, weed control, erosion control, and winter monitoring. When WDFW began the wildlife area management planning process, a Citizen Advisory Group formed with members representing diverse interests, from RMEF and fishing groups to local businesses and timber companies.

The number one objective in the area plan that was finalized in 2006 is to increase forage production for elk, and several strategies are underway to do so on the winter range. However, WDFW biologists determined that summer range condition is another limiting factor in the watershed, based on elk body condition analysis conducted in the fall of 2003 and 2005. The study showed elk were in relatively poor condition in the fall -- a time when they should be at their best, before winter. Forage in the higher volcanic slopes is generally sparse and there is little feed in areas replanted as commercial forest.

WDFW's Mt. St. Helens Elk Herd Plan, which includes the 400-some animals that the wildlife area can sustain, calls for a reduction in the herd to better balance animals with available year-round habitat. Through additional hunting permits, the goal is to bring the

total down from about 12,500 to 10,000 animals over a five-year period. The first elk hunting on the wildlife area since 1980 occurred in 2004 and the number of hunts and permits was increased in 2007.

The winter of 2006-07 came early and hard, and when a higher-than-sustainable number of elk gathered on the wildlife area, public concern triggered emergency feeding. The 2007-08 winter's early heavy rains and snow, along with high elk numbers, initiated feeding again.

"Winter feeding is only short-term help for these elk," Calkins said, "because the area just can't support this many. Winterkill of any herd at a high population level for its habitat is normal. It's one way nature brings things into balance on its own. And it happens all the time in places where no one sees a dying animal. Over time, with a reduced population and improved habitat, winter feeding shouldn't be necessary."

But Calkins says Mt. St. Helens' elk are highly visible in the open landscape and most people find it difficult to accept the hard reality of natural winterkill. Even with the best habitat or a regular feeding program, some animals will succumb to the physiological stress brought on by winter every year. The winter of 2006-07 was a good example.

"Even with an emergency winter-feeding program and after what turned

out to be a relatively mild winter overall," Calkins said, "we still found 18 dead elk during our spring survey."

Calkins expects the number of elk mortalities will be even higher after this winter of feeding.

One strategy identified in the management plan that could help the situation is completion of the intended transfer to WDFW of DOT's 4,000 acres of the original sediment retention area west of the wildlife area. With forage improvements through grants, donations and volunteer assistance, Calkins explained, it would expand the winter range capacity and the overall area that elk have available to feed.

Elk are definitely the high profile stars at Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area, but fish and other wildlife are also significant.

Steelhead and coho salmon, both federally listed as threatened species, and cutthroat trout, a federal species of concern, are in the Toutle River and its tributaries. Instream and riparian habitat was destroyed during the 1980 volcanic eruption and continues to be hampered by the man-made structures intended to control sediment movement further downstream. Those structures were not designed with fish passage and may actually be contributing to frequent shifts in the river channel and bank erosion that destroy spawning and rearing habitat.

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Scotch broom control



Toutle River flooding



River bank erosion stabilization: Before and after

Current strategies to improve the situation for fish include working with the Corps of Engineers to remove a dam spillway within the wildlife area's boundaries to allow fish movement and stabilize the river.

Until then, Calkins is working to install engineered logjams or other structures to slow the erosion. The first were completed in December 2007 and have been working well.

"The structures nudged the river's force away from the eroding banks and accumulated sediment behind them," Calkins explained.

The project was possible through support from the Washington Department of Ecology, Cowlitz Tribe, and the Lower Columbia Fish Enhancement Group. The site will now be planted with woody riparian

vegetation as a long-term measure to stabilize the riverbank and provide shade and cover for instream fish habitat.

Those and other riparian and wetland habitat management efforts also help the area's many amphibians, including the Western toad, a federal species of concern; reptiles, including the Northern alligator lizard; birds, from bald eagles to wood ducks; and mammals, including black-tailed deer and cougar.

In addition to elk viewing from the adjacent visitor center overlooks, Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area is popular for shed antler gathering, horseback riding, hiking, and paragliding. Recreation management focuses largely on protecting wintering elk from disturbance, with an annual Dec. 1 – April 30 closure to all access and a year-round closure to dogs.

The primary access to the wildlife area is currently through Weyerhaeuser land and is sometimes subject to closure during periods of high fire danger. So on Calkins' "to do" list is securing better year round public access.

Calkins is also working with the advisory group and adjoining landowners to determine the need for and feasibility of establishing trails with viewpoints, possibly off the wildlife area itself, to provide wildlife viewing access that minimizes disturbance. There's also an "informal" trail along Bear Creek that muddies up some high quality wetlands that could be relocated or improved.

Much of Calkins' work at Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area continues to be what he started out doing – weed control. Recently he has been getting a little help from WDFW's spartina control crew which "has made a world of difference," he said. With their help, Calkins has been able to get scotch broom under control on about half of the best winter range habitat on the wildlife area.

"Virtually everything we do on the areas I manage in some way involves management of invasive species, Calkins said, "but it goes hand in hand with elk forage production, which is job one."

Changing use brings change *cont. from page 1*

Consistent with our mandate from the Legislature, the department's first priority in acquiring lands is to protect fish, wildlife and their habitat. In addition, we provide public access to these lands for fishing, hunting, camping and a variety of other outdoor activities compatible with fish- and wildlife-protection objectives.

But, in recent years, these areas have attracted a growing number of people whose activities have increasingly become incompatible with those purposes.

For example, we've seen people who haul in old computers and television sets to explode them with automatic firearms and tracer shells. We've also seen an increasing number of people use these lands as dump sites, and some who take up residence on public lands for much of the year.

In drafting new rules to address these situations, WDFW consulted our statewide Land Management Advisory Council, as well as advisory groups for individual wildlife areas and concerned citizens throughout the state.

The resulting package of proposed rules were the subject of a vigorous public review process, before the Commission adopted them (see story on page 1).

I encourage all users of WDFW lands to take a look at the new rules posted on our website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wac232/>. I think you'll find they provide a fair and sensible approach to protecting both fish and wildlife habitats and recreational values consistent with healthy wildlife populations now and for future generations.

New public conduct rules now in effect *cont. from page 1*

wildlife recreational access. The primary purposes for public use of WDFW-owned or controlled lands are hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and other fish and wildlife-oriented recreational or educational activities. Other compatible outdoor activities are also allowed.

Traditional rules prohibiting dumping and littering, discharging fireworks, and other obviously problematic activity received little if any feedback from the public and are part of the new chapter. Working out the details of other issues took more time.

"We probably heard most about the rules on firearms and target practicing," Dahmer said. "Many said our lands provide unique opportunities to share hunting and shooting experiences with family and friends, and the new rules do maintain those valued traditional uses. There was never any intention of taking that away."

Dahmer explained that the rules do prohibit the discharge of firearms within 500 feet of a department designated campground and where or when it is prohibited by posted notice.

"These very limited shooting restrictions were included to protect the recreating public," he said.

Dahmer noted that camping on nearly all WDFW lands is a rustic experience enjoyed at undesignated areas

throughout the landscape. The 500-foot shooting restriction does not apply at these undesignated camping areas.

"There are actually only 21 designated campgrounds on the over 800,000 acres we manage," he said. "These few designated campgrounds have manufactured toilets and fire rings and are typically in areas that draw large numbers of campers, like along the Tucannon River fishing impoundments on the Wooten Wildlife Area in southeast Washington."

The firearms and target practicing rule (232-13-130) also prohibits use of glass, signs, appliances, mattresses, televisions, furniture and exploding items as targets.

"Yes, people really have hauled all of those kinds of things on to department lands for target practice and left the litter behind," Dahmer said.

Camping time restrictions to allow shared use also solicited a fair amount of input, and revisions were made to original proposals to accommodate scouting before opening day and back-to-back hunting seasons. The new rule includes a 21-day camping limit within a 30-day period.

"We just don't want permanent residents on public lands that are meant for everybody to enjoy," Dahmer said.

A rule section on erecting and using camps, blinds, and tree stand structures is meant to protect wildlife area trees and other resources, and to provide an equal opportunity for all users. Parking rules prohibit leaving motor vehicles or trailers unattended for more than 21 days or blocking access to boat ramps, roads, gates, and other facilities. Fire rules allow campfires up to a maximum of three feet in diameter and three feet high.

Rules governing pets allow hunters to use hunting dogs under their control, but not to let them or other pets roam unattended. From April through July, all dogs and other pets must be leashed on WDFW lands to protect nesting wildlife.

New rules were not adopted by the Commission to address livestock grazing, resource removal and vehicle use, so current regulations governing those activities still stand.

"We encourage all users of department lands to take a look at these new rules now, before the high use seasons of summer and fall," Dahmer said. "We'll be posting signs on our lands throughout the spring and spreading the word at meetings and events. We'll also be phasing in enforcement of the new rules over the coming year, generally issuing warnings rather than citations except in the case of egregious violations."

The New CRP: State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE)

Washington farmers have a new opportunity this year to enroll acreage in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's popular Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) through an initiative that focuses specifically on wildlife – State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE).

USDA's Farm Service Agency has teamed with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), and other groups and agencies across the country, to address high priority wildlife habitat needs through the new program.

The national SAFE goal is to restore or enhance 500,000 acres of wildlife habitat; the Washington state goal is 8,200 acres.

"This new program is a great example of multiple state, federal and private partnerships," said WDFW Farm Bill Coordinator Don Larsen. "In addition to the Farm Service Agency, other partners we're looking forward to working with include the Natural Resources Conservation Service, conservation districts, Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the InterMountain West Joint Venture, and of course private landowners and operators."

Cooperating landowners receive habitat establishment and maintenance cost-share, incentive, and rental payments in return for contracts to

provide specific elements of wildlife habitat. Producers can submit offers to voluntarily enroll acres in CRP-SAFE contracts for 10-15 years with USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation.

Larsen explains that to be eligible for those payments, land with a CRP or cropping history must be within one of four designated SAFE project areas in Washington that have been approved for FSA funding.

"Acreage in each of these designated areas will give us an opportunity to very specifically help the wildlife that needs it most," Larsen said. "It's a way to fine-tune the conservation practices of the whole-field or farm CRP enrollments, which have been of great benefit to wildlife in general."

Larsen noted that because the new SAFE enrollments will take a little extra effort, payments will include additional signing and cost-share incentives over traditional CRP.

"We are especially grateful for the willingness of the Farm Service Agency to work with us in this new endeavor to help wildlife," he said.

Eastern Washington Shrub-Steppe SAFE targets up to 5,200 acres in the Crab Creek drainage in Lincoln, Grant, and Adams counties, the southwest portion of the Colville Indian Reservation in Okanogan County, and the South



Brewer's sparrow

Moses Coulee in Grant County. Enrolled acreage will provide habitat for shrub-steppe bird species that have declined because of ongoing habitat loss and fragmentation throughout the West. The at-risk species with federal or state listing status that occur in the project area are sharptailed grouse, sage grouse, sage sparrow, sage thrasher and loggerhead shrike. The grasshopper sparrow, savannah sparrow and Brewer's sparrow will also benefit from this SAFE project.

WDFW biologist Todd Baarstad, who will work with farmers in the Shrub-Steppe SAFE project area, notes that cropland must be within one-half mile of an existing remnant shrub-steppe

Shrubsteppe habitat



State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement cont. from page 9



Palouse prairie

habitat block of five acres or more in size.

“Our research shows that we get the best habitat bang for the buck from CRP when it’s next to existing shrub-steppe,” Baarstad explained.

Palouse Prairie SAFE will enroll up to 2,000 acres primarily in northern and eastern Whitman County to improve and increase habitat for a variety of wildlife species by re-establishing diverse stands of grasses, forbs and shrubs. Converting cropland to fields and corridors of permanent native plant communities will benefit at-risk species such as the grasshopper sparrow, savannah sparrow and long-billed curlew. Other beneficiaries are native pollinators, including many butterflies, and resident upland and big game species such as ring-necked pheasant and white-tailed deer. Establishing buffers around and near existing remnants of the Palouse Prairie will help preserve rare plants.

“Less than one percent of the native Palouse Prairie remains in this very important wheat-producing area of eastern Washington,” said WDFW biologist Kurt Merg, who will work with area farmers to design projects that maximize benefits on minimal acres.

Columbia Basin SAFE aims for enrolling up to 500 acres within portions of several designated Irrigation Blocks in Grant, Adams and Franklin counties to benefit wildlife associated with agriculture, such as ring-necked pheasant and California quail. Also benefiting will be at-risk species such as the burrowing owl and Washington ground squirrel, which are known to inhabit irrigated circle corners and other unfarmed areas.

WDFW biologist John Cotton wants to provide Columbia Basin farmers some management options for irrigation circle corners and other hard-to-farm areas.

“Establishment of quality wildlife habitat can greatly reduce or even eliminate the need for repeated mowing, tillage or spraying to control weeds,” Cotton said.

Coastal Roosevelt Elk SAFE targets up to 500 acres of high quality elk winter forage fields in river bottoms and floodplain areas in portions of Grays Harbor, Pacific, Clallam and Mason counties. Olympic elk herds have been declining from both increased mortality and decreased productivity due to loss of habitat quantity and quality. Enrollments will emphasize improved vegetation to enhance adult and calf elk survival rates to boost the population. Multiple wetland-dependent bird species, many of which are also declining, will also benefit from this project, including shorebirds, swans and other waterfowl.

WDFW biologist Greg Schirato says the Roosevelt Elk SAFE project is just what the elk herds need.

Western square spotted blue
Jim Cummins photo



Burrowing owl

“Our research has shown that a relatively small amount of high quality winter forage acres for elk can have a positive impact on the entire elk population, Schirato said.

FSA offices will be conducting sign-ups this spring. Farmers in any of the four areas can find more information about SAFE at http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/safe08.pdf.

Upper Yakima, Skookumchuck projects awarded

Two Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW)-led habitat protection and land acquisition projects in southcentral Washington recently received a special award from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition for outstanding collaboration.

WDFW staff were honored by former Washington governors Dan Evans and Mike Lowry of the Coalition for their work with many cooperating partners on the Upper Yakima River riparian protection project and the Skookumchuck Watershed acquisition project.

The Upper Yakima project proposes to secure conservation easements on up to 450 acres of riparian and wetlands habitat -- one of the last remaining blocks of intact and highly complex fish and wildlife habitat in the lower Easton reach of the Yakima River, explained WDFW habitat biologist William Meyer of Ellensburg. The project's targeted acreage is surrounded by private and public lands already in conservation easements, so the impact will be much greater in overall basin-wide planning.

"Securing this property in conservation easements is a unique opportunity to protect a critical link in the aquatic chain that supports recovery efforts for Mid-Columbia steelhead and bull trout," Meyer said, "and it complements ongoing salmon habitat enhancement efforts."

Although the current landowners have been excellent stewards and "a pleasure to work with," Meyer said the threat to the property is unprecedented development pressure. WDFW has partnered with the Yakama Nation and the Kittitas Conservation Trust to complete the project and has received support from the Kittitas County Commission, Suncadia Resort, Yakima River Flyfishers, Mountains to Sound Greenway, Cascade Land Conservancy, Kittitas Environmental Education Network, and the Bonneville Power Administration.

The Skookumchuck project, over several years and two phases, involved the acquisition of a total of 17,500 acres of primarily shrub steppe habitat to establish a landscape linkage between WDFW's Whiskey Dick and Quilomene

wildlife areas in Kittitas County, explained WDFW habitat biologist Mark Teske. The second phase was completed last year, funded predominately by the Coalition.

"We partnered with the Trust for Public Land in this key acquisition to ultimately protect an entire watershed," Teske said. "The Skookumchuck was an in-holding between our wildlife areas and a gap between protected areas within the largest swath of shrub steppe remaining in the state."

WDFW's Greater Sage-Grouse Recovery Plan, the Upper Middle Mainstem Sub-basin Plan, the Nature Conservancy's Columbia Plateau Ecoregional Assessment, and Audubon's Important Bird Area list all note that conservation of the Skookumchuck will benefit everything from sage grouse to striped whipsnakes. NOAA Fisheries designated Skookumchuck Creek as critical habitat for threatened steelhead. The acquisition project was supported by the Kittitas County Commission, the entire 13th legislative district delegation, and business, conservation, education and sportsmen groups.



Skookumchuck shrub steppe



Upper Yakima ponds

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