



Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

March 11, 2021 • 9:30 am – Noon

Remote Web-based Meeting

Councilmembers in Attendance (all via conference call): Peter Dunwiddie (Chair), Becky Brown, Kathryn Kurtz, Claudine Reynolds, Cheryl Schultz, Randi Shaw, Ian Sinks, Brock Milliern (first hour; DNR), Adam Cole (RCO), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Heather Kapust (ECY), Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

Councilmembers Absent: Heida Diefenderfer, Janelle Downs, Maynard Mallonee

DNR Staff in Attendance: Tim Stapleton, Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Jake Kleinknecht, Bec Braisted, Keyna Bugner, Noel Plemmons, Tynan Ramm-Granberg, Irene Webber, David Wilderman

Guest Presenter: Jeanette Burkhardt, Watershed Planner for Yakama Nation Fisheries

Visitors: None

Chair Peter Dunwiddie called the meeting to order at 9:33 a.m. The agenda was accepted without changes.

Approval of the Minutes for the September 18, 2020 Council Meeting

The minutes were moved by Cheryl Schultz and seconded by Becky Brown. Council approved the meeting minutes unanimously, with a note to correct a typographical error.

Announcement

Brock Milliern announced that he would be leaving DNR the following week to accept a new position in the toxics cleanup program at the Washington State Department of Ecology. Chair Peter Dunwiddie thanked Brock for his support for the council's work and his dedication to DNR's conservation programs.

Carry-forward Items from Previous Meetings

- Report from NHAC member visits to Natural Areas: Kathryn Kurtz recently visited Kennedy Creek. Chair Dunwiddie enjoyed the "virtual tour" of Crowberry Bog from Joe Rocchio's presentation at the recent Washington Botanical Symposium. Becky

Brown noted that her students have been visiting Steptoe Butte p-NAP/NRCA for their research projects.

- Update on funding for Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program: Joe Rocchio noted several new grants received by the Natural Heritage Program, and Curt Pavola reported that the governor's proposed budget for the 2021-2023 Biennium includes an incremental increase for the Natural Areas Program operating budget, known as a "maintenance level enhancement" that follows acquisition of new lands or construction of new projects; and it may be more than \$400,000 for the program if the increase is supported by the Legislature.
- Recommendation update – Steptoe Butte: Andrea Thorpe reviewed past progress for acquisition of conservation lands at Steptoe Butte and reported that the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board granted DNR's request for a waiver to acquire the communications towers on the property using grant funds. DNR will likely be the landowner, along with a management partnership with State Parks which owns the park at the top of the butte. She noted that the retention and use of tower revenues by DNR is still needing resolution but with State Parks they have different authorities.
- Status of boundary adjustment work arising from the 2020 WWRP grant round, including Onion Ridge p-NAP: Curt Pavola provided background on the requirements for in-county hearings to establish natural areas boundaries, and the inability to hold public hearings during the COVID-19 state of emergency. DNR is looking to try a combined online and in-county option for one of the sites and if it works as planned then the other sites in need of boundary hearings, including Onion Ridge, would be completed prior to the deadline from the Recreation and Conservation Office.

Potential Beaver Introduction at Trout Lake NAP and Klickitat Canyon NRCA

Topic Summary: Report on discussions with Yakama Nation natural resources staff assessing the potential for restoring hydrologic conditions at two natural areas where beaver are no longer active, possibly including relocation of beaver to the sites or habitat enhancements to attract them.

David Wilderman, program ecologist for DNR's Natural Areas Program, noted that introducing or reintroducing an animal species to a natural area would be new to the program. Today DNR staff are looking to the council for discussion and initial thoughts on the topic, as well as feedback on the site assessments and other types of restoration being considered. Before any reintroductions or species-specific habitat alterations might be taken in the future, the program will bring this topic back for council review. Wilderman also pointed out the guidance document ("Introduction – Reintroduction considerations June 2007") provided to council members, which was developed primarily for use in decision making around rare species projects, but many of the considerations would be the same for species like beaver.

Keyna Bugner, natural areas manager for DNR's Southeast Region, offered an overview of the presentation and the two natural areas under consideration, Trout Lake NAP and Klickitat Canyon NRCA, both of which are in Klickitat County, with a portion of Klickitat Canyon NRCA in Yakima County. Both sites have altered hydrology from pre-natural area land uses and both sites have had beaver populations in the past. Restoring hydrologic conditions is likely important for maintaining the ecosystems and particular rare species on the sites, including Sandhill crane at both sites and Oregon spotted frog at Trout Lake. Some restoration work has been done at both sites in the past and this has improved conditions in some areas, but more may be needed. Staff are working with Yakama Nation Fisheries to assess the sites and collect

data to help determine what, if any, restoration actions should be taken. Klickitat Canyon scored high for beaver habitat suitability in part of this assessment.

Jeannette Burkhardt, Watershed Planner for Yakama Nation Fisheries, noted that the members of the Yakama Tribe and their ancestors view Mount Adams as the source of water, which in turn is the source of rivers, which then provide their traditional food sources. They revere this area and have enjoyed continuous use of these sites for centuries or longer. Beavers (or “Wishpush”) are credited for keeping water on the landscape and helping to provide the source of all things using water. Beavers were removed from the lands with severe consequences for watersheds. The Wishpush Working Group is collaborative local effort to support and promote the use of beaver in restoration. Burkhardt showed maps of both sites showing that the areas of interest were highly ranked using the Beaver Restoration Assessment Tool (BRAT) – a model developed Utah State University.

Burkhardt noted that the Yakama Tribe and the Department of Natural Resources have a memorandum of understanding for habitat restoration (and other state lands management activities). Beaver reintroduction and habitat improvements are in line with the MOU. She concluded by noting that both of the DNR sites are upstream of barriers that would prevent anadromous fish from reaching them; however Trout Lake NAP offers the right conditions for Pacific lamprey and they would likely be able to get over the fish passage barriers and use the area.

Bugner concluded the presentation by pointing out that assessment and data collection continue, including flowtopography, drone footage, and water level measurements. The focus at Klickitat Canyon is on potential beaver reintroduction, coupled with low tech process-based restoration. At Trout Lake, there is substantially more assessment and data collection to be completed and the focus is primarily on low-tech process-based restoration rather than beaver reintroduction at this time.

Cheryl Schultz is on a committee with a master’s student examining beaver reintroduction and she encouraged tracking throughout the reintroduction process to determine success and map how the beaver use the site. The student is also reviewing questions about beaver bringing disease organisms to new sites. Burkhardt described this as good work, with a goal of creating tools to use both pre- and post-reintroductions. She also noted that beavers should be relocated within the same watershed.

Becky Brown recalled that perhaps *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* (BD) fungus had already been identified at Trout Lake, and DNR will check with the specialist at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Chair Dunwiddie wondered when the beaver were last at these sites and whether we know if the habitat changed since that time, or whether they were trapped out. Wilderman recalls beaver from about 15 years ago at Trout Lake, but does not know the reasons they are no longer there. Dunwiddie questioned whether any factors might preclude their successful reintroduction. Burkhardt suggested all of these questions are good questions to ask and to address as we seek to either mimic beaver activity or to make the site more hospitable for their use. She gave an example from a recent analysis/introduction.

Brown said she is working with another student looking at the relationship of beaver to wildfire resiliency in the Methow watershed. In that area they've experienced people trapping the beaver they relocated, reinforcing the need for public outreach with neighbors and the community. She said the two master's projects are indicating positive impacts from reintroduction, and noted that the students are also studying beaver dam analogues.

Dunwiddie inquired about the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's role in permitting or licensing beaver trapping. Burkhardt replied that WDFW regulates recreational and commercial trapping, and they have a new relocation program. She added that Allen Lebovitz with DNR helped to create the WDFW guidance. Burkhardt added that a data gap exists for reintroductions in part due to the ability of landowners to remove the beavers from their lands without reporting it.

Claudine Reynolds said she appreciates this conversation with the council and feels that beavers are part of the solution. She added that beavers are territorial, and so reintroducing in locations with other beavers could be problematic. Also keep in mind that not all beavers build dams. For Trout Lake, she said spotted frogs have super high fidelity to their breeding sites, so any changes for beaver habitat should describe how to mitigate that. Reynolds suggested putting trackers on reintroduced beavers to know their fate, and Burkhardt concurred saying that they have used trackers for reintroduced beavers in the Methow watershed.

Wilderman concurred with the sensitivity of Oregon spotted frogs to this work, and DNR is treading lightly at Trout Lake with all forms of restoration, collecting data and modelling it out before deciding on any actions.

Chair Dunwiddie offered that he was grateful to everyone for this presentation and council discussion about exciting projects.

Natural Heritage Plan Process Update

Joe Rocchio summarized the work of the council subcommittee, which includes Andrea Thorpe, Heida Diefenderfer, Ian Sinks, and Janelle Downs. Rocchio shared the goals of the Natural Heritage Plan, as outlined in the Natural Areas Preserves Act, summarized the topics and structure that past plans have included, summarized input from the council subcommittee, and then shared his proposed outline for the 2022 NHP Plan. The goal for this discussion was to create agreement on an outline that Natural Heritage Program staff will use to begin writing the plan.

The proposed Plan outline presented to the council was as follows:

- INTRODUCTION / PURPOSE OF THE PLAN
- PART 1: CONSERVING WASHINGTON'S NATURAL BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY
- PART 2. SETTING CONSERVATION AND REPRESENTATION PRIORITIES
- PART 3: STATUS OF THE STATEWIDE SYSTEM OF NATURAL AREAS
- PART 4: ACCOMPLISHMENTS FROM 2018-2022
- PART 5: NEAR-TERM GOALS

Randi Shaw said she appreciates the way the proposed plan is laid out with connections between the Natural Heritage Program work and the work of other conservation organizations. She asked if DNR has any planned projects including culturally important landscapes as

priorities for conservation. Rocchio and Curt Pavola noted past efforts to examine sites for NAP status and that many existing natural areas include such features.

Kathryn Kurtz noted that she likes the reframing around Parts 3 and 4, status and accomplishments, and she likes the Part 1.3 framing around how DNR natural areas fit within a statewide system with partners like land trusts, tribes and other land-based organizations. In regard to the proposed plan outline, Kurtz noted that she likes the reframing around Parts 3 and 4, status and accomplishments, and she likes how Part 1.3 addresses how DNR natural areas fit within a statewide system with partners like land trusts, tribes and other land-based organizations.

Becky Brown noted appreciation for the nexus with DNR's Forest Health Plan. She would like to see the Natural Heritage Program being able to provide input for post-fire management actions, such as encouraging that nonnative plants not be planted following fire. She expressed concern that nonnative species are being recommend for seeding by some DNR staff. Her concern is especially related to the potential of those species spreading into high-quality areas. Tim Stapleton noted that both programs have ongoing discussions with Jen Watkins (Planning, Science, and Monitoring Assistant Division Manager in the Forest Health and Resiliency Division) about integrating natural heritage and natural areas program work. David Wilderman noted that Natural Areas Program staff do recommend seed sources, however supply can be limited.

Adam Cole inquired about the coverage of the plan for DNR natural areas, and Rocchio said it includes conservation priorities for both natural area preserves and natural resources conservation areas. Rocchio added that the plan will describe the differences of the two designations and how each is designated, along with the intent for both preserves and conservation areas.

Ian Sinks described the Natural Heritage Plan as a goals statement for DNR conservation programs to Legislature, but asked whether it will lay out the resources needed to implement the plan. Sinks suggested that the plan should build a case for any implementation resources needed. Rocchio noted that in the early years the plans often had a section describing needed resources, maybe because the programs were new. Stapleton added that the plan might include a summary of staff and other needs that help inform agency management and the Legislature more fully about current program capacity. Rocchio agreed that the plan has seemingly presented activities we often don't have direct resources to actually accomplish, even though some of that work is continually sought and eventually funded through grants.

Andrea Thorpe added that the last plan did not include the topic of resource needs because staff and council were also discussing the creation of a strategic plan that may have included that information. Rocchio offered that an executive summary might include a summary of funded and unfunded positions and activities.

Dunwiddie closed out the conversation and observed that the council may wish to explore a second document that would serve the purpose of selling the program to the Legislature instead of adding that message to the Natural Heritage Plan.

Potential Initial NAPs for "Quick-Plan" trial during the 2021-2023 Biennium

Curt Pavola summarized recent conversations with DNR region natural areas staff and their managers regarding the writing of “quick plans” for natural area preserves when the new state budget biennium begins in July 2021. He reviewed a summary of likely planning projects, some contingent on budget decisions by the Legislature and DNR Executive Management, which will be revisited later this year as program resources are allocated:

Southeast Region – Moving forward to utilize the quick plan format and finalize old draft Trout Lake NAP plan that had been reviewed but not finalized by the council; with current community needs focusing on the public access and uses area of planning; also the updated plan will described the decade of conservation actions that have occurred since the draft plan was written.

Pacific Cascade Region – Highest priority would be Columbia Falls NAP that has sensitive features currently impacted by visitation from a trail that begins on U.S. Forest Service lands; with goals including site protection, relocation of trails, and continuing the public use partnership with the Forest Service in the Columbia Gorge Scenic Area.

South Puget Sound Region – A potential planning project needing more review of resources and confirmation of staff time between region land managers and program ecologists is Oak Patch NAP.

Northwest Region – Current region staffing level doesn’t provide capacity for planning, however if resources are added the priority site would Daily Prairie NAP.

Northeast Region – No staff capacity; only minimal funding for staff to care-take sites on behalf of the Natural Areas Program.

Olympic Region – DNR is not currently able to fund Natural Areas Program staff in Olympic Region due to budget limitations.

Other Business / Comments from the Public

Chair Dunwiddie inquired whether any members of the public may be on the phone and would like to provide comment to the council. No one spoke.

Dunwiddie asked whether council members could suggest a site be considered for natural area designation and if so, what the process would look like. Rocchio noted that council recommendations for potentially new natural areas would be welcomed and in fact, in the early years of the programs, that was an expectation from council members. Rocchio suggested that if council members could do some initial consideration of whether the site would meet criteria as laid out in the Natural Heritage Plan, that would be helpful for Natural Heritage to help determine likely designation. Rocchio encouraged council members to reach out and initiate a dialogue with Natural Heritage staff regarding any suggested sites. Dunwiddie encouraged council members to keep an eye out for such opportunities.

Tim Stapleton informed the council that DNR had just made the announcement for the interim division manager replacing Brock Milliern: Laurie Benson, who is currently a deputy region manager in DNR’s South Puget Sound Region, will be acting for an unknown time while the agency recruits for the permanent appointment. Curt Pavola noted Laurie Benson’s

management of region natural areas staff and said he has appreciated her support for the program over the years.

Dunwiddie noted mention of new staff in the Natural Heritage Program report and requested they be introduced. Rocchio introduced Irene Weber, the new Natural Heritage Program ecologist (position left vacant when Rocchio assumed program manager role in January 2020). Weber started in December 2020. Rocchio also introduced Bec Braisted who has been with the program since March 2020 in a full-time temporary position to work on the State Park Ecological Integrity Assessment project. Braisted's position was recently extended through September 2021.

Adjourn

Chair Dunwiddie concluded the conference call at 11:59 am.

MINUTES APPROVED: June 9, 2021