



NATURAL HERITAGE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

October 19, 2022 • 9:30 am – 1:15 pm
Remote Web-based Meeting

Councilmembers in Attendance (all via conference call): Heida Diefenderfer (Chair), Becky Brown, Janelle Downs, Kathryn Kurtz, Ian Sinks, Adam Cole (RCO), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Heather Kapust (ECY), Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn (DNR), Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

Councilmembers Absent: Peter Dunwiddie, Maynard Mallonee, Claudine Reynolds, Cheryl Schultz

DNR Staff in Attendance: Tim Stapleton, Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Mark Reed, Dave Wilderman, Bruce Schneider; Laurie Benson joined at 11:15 am

Visitors: John Bishop of WSU-Vancouver

Chair Heida Diefenderfer called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. The agenda was accepted without changes after brief discussion of pending council vacancies.

Approval of the Minutes for the June 14, 2022, Council Meeting

The meeting minutes as drafted were moved for approval by Becky Brown and seconded by Ian Sinks. The council approved the minutes unanimously.

Carry-Forward Topics from Previous Meeting

- Report from NHAC member visits to Natural Areas:
 - Janelle Downs reported spring 2022 on Rare Care surveys at Ginkgo State Park in the portion proposed for natural area designation. They discovered a rare plant population in the southern portion of the site.
 - Chair Diefenderfer visited Cypress Island and noted disrepair at the beach entrance to the trail for Eagle Cliff. Curt Pavola noted the pending capital project to redesign and update the boardwalk and comfort stations at the Pelican Beach campsite and trailhead area. Pavola noted the council visited Cypress Island several years ago at Secret Harbor prior to restoration project. Tim Stapleton suggested the council may want to visit Cypress Island again.
 - Joe Rocchio added a staff report of a visit from national leader of NatureServe. Rocchio provided an overview of the sites visited on the Olympic Peninsula, goals for the Washington segment of the national NatureServe tour, and discussion highlights. Attendees included NatureServe CEO and President Sean O'Brien and NatureServe Assistant Thea Cole, Natural Heritage Advisory Council Chair Heida Diefenderfer of Pacific Northwest National Laboratory,

and DNR hosts including Rocchio, Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn (new division manager for the DNR Recreation and Conservation Division), Tynan Ramm-Granberg, Irene Weber, Allen Estep, and David Wilderman who joined the group at Crowberry Bog NAP and discussed conservation features and various management topics. Ohlson-Kiehn remarked about the educational discussions during the site visits, including management of state-owned trust lands under DNR's Habitat Conservation Plan. She also noted that Sean O'Brien mentioned NatureServe's struggle, similar to Washington Natural Heritage Program, in getting the word out about the natural heritage information they and their member programs house.

- Ohlson-Kiehn mentioned the recent *Crosscut* article that also featured Crowberry Bog. Rocchio described the experience of being featured and gave an overview of the article.
- Update on Funding for Natural Heritage and Natural Areas Programs:
 - Rocchio described the federal Recovering America's Wildlife Act (RAWA) which would provide funding to Washington state under the Department of Fish and Wildlife's "State Wildlife Action Plan." The legislation has passed the U.S. House and has bi-partisan support in the U.S. Senate. Passage would direct about \$1 billion annually to states with wildlife action plans including perhaps up to \$30 million to Washington state, which is well above current federal support. The legislation would add a rare plants element to the state plans and include implementation funding. Janet Gorrell added that WDFW is discussing adding plants to September 2025 update Washington's Wildlife Action Plan, and may be able to make minor revisions to the current plan if RAWA passes in order to receive funds earlier. She noted that the new federal funding would require a 25 percent state match, and some of that may come from current operating budget requests to the Washington State Legislature. Rocchio said a regional meeting among the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and western natural heritage program managers raised the possibility that some federal funds may also be counted as match. Heather Kapust added that military funds under the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program can also be used as match. Gorrell noted that the existing South Sound "Sentinel Lands" partnership is similar, and REPI may be available again to this partnership. Kathryn Kurtz said that some education funding used for wildlife conservation may also be used as match for RAWA.

Introduction of New Division Manager

Chair Diefenderfer welcomed the new DNR division manager for the newly formed Recreation and Conservation Division, Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn.

Ohlson-Kiehn said she has worked with Washington DNR for 20 years and was appointed to the division manager position in July. Previously she's worked with Rainforest Action, earned a forestry degree, worked in forest ecology overseas, and relocated to the west coast to pursue public lands management. Among her many DNR roles she was recently the project planning assistant division manager overseeing implementation of the Habitat Conservation Plan for trust lands, which also includes natural areas, and participated in an eight year project to develop DNR's marbled murrelet conservation strategy. Most recently she has led the process to revitalize the Trust Land Transfer tool that DNR uses to reposition trust assets and achieve

conservation goals. She acknowledged being in a learning curve for natural heritage methodology and sees her role at supporting top notch staff and the council advisers through adding more resources, which is also the aim of the Commissioner of Public Lands and key legislators. She added that one challenge in promoting natural heritage is that many people lump it in with natural areas land management, so getting the word out about the work of the Natural Heritage Program is key, such as with the recent article in *Crosscut* online magazine.

Kathryn Kurtz said the proposed budget increase for natural heritage and natural areas is shown in a long list of DNR requests as priority #12 in the request to the governor's office. Ohlson-Kiehn noted that the legislative materials supporting all of DNR's requests are grouped into themes, and the "Science-Based Conservation" funding for the programs is grouped with other "good governance" proposals, sharing the first page with Trust Land Transfer revitalization, tribal rights legislation, and other top priorities. She offered to share the materials from DNR's legislative director with councilmembers.

Chair Diefenderfer offered the concept of a council subcommittee to support legislative and budget topics, possibly a budget proviso. Ohlson-Kiehn welcomed support for DNR's legislative proposals, as well as other funding sources, and was unsure what tasks a subcommittee could implement. Kurtz suggested focusing on agency prioritization because budget provisos are generally a mechanism for the Legislature to direct agencies to change direction or do something new, and with funds in the base agency operating budget it is more about prioritizing without the need for a legislative proviso; "provisos drive new direction." Ohlson-Kiehn agreed, noting that the Trust Land Transfer revitalization request is a proviso for new programmatic direction.

The council discussed the proposed revisions to the Trust Land Transfer process, including the stakeholder committee that assists with the DNR review of transfer sites, such as state agencies, conservation organizations, the timber industry, beneficiaries, tribes, and vulnerable communities. In future this group will receive nominations and determine eligibility, although proposed natural areas (preserves or conservation areas) will go through the DNR process. Tim Stapleton observed that the new transfer process doesn't affect the mission differences for potential trust transfers among DNR's programs but it does bring more transparency. Ohlson-Kiehn noted that the tool revitalization is primarily supported by the conservation community. Janelle Downs asked for clarification about the review process affecting natural areas designations or boundaries, and Ohlson-Kiehn said the new process is really about the tool and not the process for establishing natural areas, so an advisory committee decision on a transfer should not affect the reasons supporting creation of a natural area.

Agency Decision Packages

Tim Stapleton reviewed the several DNR proposals to the governor and Legislature for additional program funding, both operating budget and capital budget and including both the Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program.

Chair Diefenderfer said it is fantastic to see this level of support for the programs, adding that when she met with Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz she heard strong support for the programs as an element of Keep Washington Evergreen. Stapleton noted that Joe Rocchio will be the lead at DNR for developing the Essential Conservation Areas (ECAs) included in the funding proposal, working with other agencies.

Stapleton thanked previously acting-manager Laurie Benson for bringing natural heritage and natural areas issues to the rigorous DNR budget-request process, adding that Ohlson-Kiehn stepped in to push for visibility of these requests during final reviews which ensured they become agency priorities.

Chair Diefenderfer inquired about whether the concept of ECAs is changing through the recent discussion, and Rocchio replied that the concept is unchanged but multiple state agencies are seeking to implement them with new funding requests. Natural Heritage Program staff will be central the development of ECAs statewide, even if the proposed funding does not come about then the program will seek other ways to get this important program work accomplished. He added that new funding will free up time for current staff to work on ECAs by hiring additional staff to assist with current project workload.

Rocchio recapped the benefits of creating Essential Conservation Areas, which would summarize the natural heritage element data in approximately 7,000 records across the state, providing the analysis that simplifies complex data into a product that non-scientists can work with and incorporate new site characteristics for protection urgency and management urgency. Kurtz inquired about the way risk will be incorporated into the mapped ECAs, such as climate change, and Rocchio said both “urgency” ranks will be applied to current natural heritage rarity and quality data to create spatial products that can be easily applied to identify and address various types of threats to the features.

Ian Sinks said ECAs are an exciting development for the Natural Heritage Program and land trust partners. He inquired about specific staffing for ECA work and Stapleton replied that the budget proposal adds one new scientist to Natural Heritage and also science support for Natural Areas, which build in flexibility to re-focus staff duties as needed to accomplish the work. Chair Diefenderfer noted the value of this work for natural area management planning, and Stapleton and Curt Pavola agreed that new staff will allow both land managers and ecologists to direct more time to site-based planning.

Subcommittee Report

Chair Diefenderfer reviewed the work of the subcommittee created by the council during the June 2022 meeting, which included Chair Diefenderfer, Kathryn Kurtz, and Ian Sinks. Subcommittee members then met with Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz and high-level staff. They reviewed council membership, noting that council members interact with legislators and the budget process across a variety of interests, such as academic, environmental education, land trusts and others. Commissioner Franz noted that she had not heard of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council during her run for office, and she restated her focus on environmental education and support for the Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program, including the new funding proposals.

Following the conversation, the subcommittee is suggesting a new focus to increase statewide visibility. With land trust and environmental education partnerships available in the majority of Washington counties, the DNR programs could partner with current, expanding efforts to foster environmental education-focused workforce training on DNR natural areas and also on land trusts around the state. The educational organizations would need one DNR staff person to coordinate activities with. For collaboration with land trusts, partnering with community based organizations will foster caring about conservation lands and, in turn, policy makers will learn about the value of Natural Heritage and DNR Natural Areas.

Ian Sinks shared that the perspective of land trusts is collaborative. The question is how to plug in to natural heritage information to conserve their lands and resources, and where to help facilitate state acquisition when appropriate. A closer working relationship would empower land trusts to be better supporters and cooperators with the Natural Heritage Program to achieve mutual goals. The question, with new resources and staff, is how much time and resources would be available for this type of collaboration.

Kathryn Kutz suggested that “leveraging” is the word to describe how new efforts can be achieved. If current budget proposals are to meet existing program needs, then the next additional layer of funding support will create the opportunity to intersect with workforce development and environmental education. Further, Kurtz said the current DNR legislative proposals can leverage new partnerships and support, such as areas where program gaps overlap with legislative leaders who can help address DNR’s budget needs. And with funding for new staff, then the work they do can perhaps leverage other DNR priorities where previously the agency had limited capacity (such as forest health projects).

Becky Brown offered that the ideas of the subcommittee were good, and reflect long-standing goals of the council.

Tim Stapleton shared that he’s noted several follow-ups for himself: Checking in with the new DNR environmental education coordinator to understand how that program might grow; pursue any potential connections with DNR’s new environmental justice efforts and potentially new staff who will work on those strategies; and assure close communication and partnership with DNR’s tribal relations liaison and they consider future structure and staffing.

Chair Diefenderfer reflected on her advocacy with her senator years ago, which she felt did not go well. The message she heard was roughly “for environmental education, how can legislators justify natural areas over schools?” Kurtz agrees, saying that the message needs to be more than just natural areas, talking about how central natural areas are to the education and other priority missions. Laurie Benson agreed that talking about linkages to other efforts removes the point of conflict, or choosing among priorities.

Janelle Downs said the subcommittee work is impressive. Though as a council member she still has angst about how the council can best function to advise staff; how best to support staff. She noted she has participated in environmental education (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) throughout her career, and supports the land trust concept for training and education, but as a council how can they best present themselves to assist, with what within roles and functions?

The council and staff discussed the missions of the DNR programs including education and research; inability to supporting graduate students with paid stipends; enhancing education and active research with any new funding; whether a standing council committee might be helpful; enlisting other DNR staff (such as the communications shop) in outreach activities; enlisting non-DNR staff to make community connections; exploring who the current audience of DNR communications is and determine how well that fits program needs; the power of community connections to reach more broadly and effectively than program-DNR outreach can; the long-term nature of outreach and support that comes from education at early ages through college years; the multi-cultural aspects of education outreach to communities statewide; arts outreach

to events and visits natural areas, or outreach utilizing humor as with one example from a dam removal project in Europe; participation in DNR’s communications strategic plan, or adding additional elements for natural areas; having the organizational capacity to “answer the phone” – programmatic, not individuals – when communities begin to respond to outreach activities.

Chair Diefenderfer suggested a follow-up meeting among interested council members and DNR staff to plan for additional communication with Commissioner Franz and help shape the agenda for the January meeting.

Agency Oral Reports

Janet Gorrell, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife:

- WDFW is hiring a land stewardship section manager to oversee 1,300 acres of natural area preserves and oversight of WDFW’s approximately one million acres for protection, restoration, prescribed fire, and range management. Also, the agency created a new work unit for communications and public engagement, pulling together outreach, watchable wildlife, and similar functions to better support the agency.
- They have submitted two key decision packages: 1) “Restoring Washington’s Biodiversity” that will support development and implementation of species recovery plans for 208 species of greatest conservation need, help stop the decline in habitat quality, and support partnerships for recovery, with the roughly \$25 million request to be distributed across agency programs; and 2) A proposal to manage impacts to state lands, in partnership with DNR and State Parks, to monitor ecological integrity and refine WDFW’s current methodology developed with the Natural Heritage Program and which attempted to rely on citizen science; the funding would now allow surveys to be completed with staff, with a cost of \$1.7 million.

Andrea Thorpe, Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission:

- State Parks has submitted a significant budget decision package for planning (such as for Ginkgo State Park natural area preserve) to help the agency assess methodologies and create coordination with others, both internally across other State Parks land designations and among other state agencies. The new funding would increase capacity to conduct Ecological Integrity Assessments, both to hire staff internally and also contract with the Natural Heritage Program or others to conduct assessments.
- The agency has recently reorganized its stewardship function into a new division that is parallel with other agency functions, such as park development. One goal is to promote stewardship within parks.
- State Parks is moving forward with planning at Steptoe Butte State Park and Steptoe Battlefield State Park Heritage Site. In addition, they are working on a capital plan to improve the road and address a public request for a wider road to accommodate non-vehicle use. Tribes expressed a need for protection of significant cultural resources and their concern with facilities (CXT, communications towers), with the current plan now scoped to move CXT, fix potholes, and may make the top of the butte ADA access only.
- At Ginkgo Petrified Forest State Park, portions of the site were burned in the Vantage Highway Fire earlier this season. It was a relatively moist and patchy fire; not too intense. Herbicides will be applied to the area this fall, followed by evaluation of native plant response next spring, with potential future weed control and seeding. They currently have Ecological Integrity Assessment data for monitoring post-fire, which

will be used to assess the areas that burned hottest and where herbicides have been applied.

Heather Kapust, Washington State Department of Ecology:

- She noted that the DNR budget request that did not make it into the governor's proposed budget, the "Natural Areas Completion" funding package, would have been a game-changer for DNR acquisition of key parcels more quickly, before the opportunities are lost due to landowner timelines or for pieces of sites that are not competitive for grant funding. DNR Transactions Section had wanted this capacity 20 years ago when she was part of the DNR land acquisition team.
- The agency has finalized regulations for the cap-and-invest program under the Climate Commitment Act, to be implemented on Jan 1, 2023.
- The agency submitted:
 - 40 operating budget decision packages, totaling \$79.6 million in new funding and 167.6 new FTEs (total proposed operating budget for 2023-25 is \$784.3 million and 2,072.5 FTEs).
 - 31 capital project requests, totaling \$1.38 billion in new appropriations and 19.7 new capital FTEs; along with \$1.73 billion in re-appropriations. A few capital request highlights involving habitat or acquisition:
 - Water Quality Grants and Loans Programs – \$715 million
 - Floodplains by Design - \$70 million
 - Streamflow Restoration - \$40 million
 - Chehalis Basin Strategy - \$70 million
 - Six USFWS National Coastal Wetlands Conservation applications submitted to USFWS for FY23 (\$5.7 million)
- Ecology is continuing to work through changes from its "Modern Work Environment," currently reconfiguring their headquarters building.

Adam Cole, Recreation and Conservation Office (Submitted following the meeting after he departed due to a schedule conflict):

- At the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board meeting on October 25-26 multiple grant programs' ranked project lists will be presented for approval to send the Legislature in December. DNR and other agency projects to protect, restore, and maintain natural areas are among the hundreds of projects on these list, including the Natural Areas Category priorities. The board will hear public comment on the agency's Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation and Conservation Plan, which contains RCO's 5-year strategic priorities for grant programs.

Natural Heritage and Natural Areas Program Reports

Joe Rocchio reported that botanist Walter Fertig departed the Natural Heritage Program to take the position of arboretum director with Washington State University in Pullman. Rocchio recently hired Jesse Miller as the new botanist, highlighting his recent work with moss and lichens and noting he is a lecturer at Stanford. Miller will join the program on January 16. He added that Miller has a passion for mentoring students and will be a good fit for future environmental education efforts.

Curt Pavola announced the re-filling of a long-vacant natural areas manager position in the department's Northeast Region. Connor Nikkola, previously with the Lincoln County Conservation District, joins DNR due to new operating funds for the Natural Areas Program in

the current biennium budget, restoring capacity lost from cuts during the Great Recession. Pavola also announced the successful grant proposals submitted by program staff in several Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program grant categories. If the Legislature approves funding at recent traditional levels, then all land acquisition grants are likely to receive funding and the “state lands” restoration and development grants would be funded.

Other Business / Comments from the Public

Chair Diefenderfer noted her recent opportunity to serve on a Washington State Academy of Sciences team helping to create a “net ecological gain” concept at the request of the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife. Diefenderfer also reported that council member Cheryl Schultz has given her notification that she needs to step back from the council during the next year due to a very busy schedule of other commitments. The council discussed filling the position, potentially short-term. Chair Diefenderfer asked for any recommendations from council members to be communicated to her and DNR staff.

John Bishop, member of the public and biological sciences professor at WSU-Vancouver noted his appreciation for learning about the mission of the council during today’s discussion. He stated that he’s visited a fair number of natural areas over the years and is interested in being on council. Would fill the role of “expert on natural areas,” and he also own a tiny piece of timberland if that fits into qualifications. Mr. Bishop has served on the Mount St. Helens Institute board for 23 years.

Chair Diefenderfer called for any comments from other members of the public who may be on the call. No others were known to be on the call, and no one replied.

Adjourn

Chair Diefenderfer concluded the video conference call at approximately 1:15 pm.

MINUTES APPROVED: May 4, 2023