



# Director's Report to the Commission

August 2-3, 2019

## Public and Policy Engagement

### **Regional Visits and Digital Open Houses**

In July, we visited with editorial and news staff from the Wenatchee World, Ellensburg Daily Record, Yakima Herald, Spokesman Review, and The Columbian.

We hosted three digital open houses to hear from the public and answer questions. So far, these open houses have spanned Regions 1, 2, and 5.

### **25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

The Department celebrated its 25th Anniversary with a declaration from the Governor recognizing July 1, 2019 as "Appreciation Day for Washington's Fish and Wildlife." You may have noticed on-site and digital branding, a Director video, a Director's Bulletin message to our partners, plus 11 individual partner features recognizing the collaborative work that has been so instrumental to our success.

### **Improving Access – ADA Website Requirement**

The Department remediated an additional 56 higher-use documents, available on our website, to better provide access to those who have a visual challenge.

### **Legislative Affairs**

July has been a busy month for legislative outreach. The Director, legislative and budget team met with members of the natural resources committees along with budget writers to update them on some of the Department's budget decisions resulting from partial funding in the 2019-21 biennial budget. Conversations have helped to clarify some of the decisions made in the final days of session and have allowed us to get critical feedback on the best approach for the 2020 supplemental session.

Additionally, we had two legislative tours in July.

- On July 8, the House Rural Economic Development, Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee met at the Sherman Creek Headquarters to discuss forest health and wolf management in Northeast Washington. The tour was based out of Republic and allowed legislators to meet and learn about some of the

management challenges directly from Department staff, the Forest Service, the local sheriff, conservation groups and cattle producers.

- On July 23, we hosted a tour at Soos Creek hatchery for capital budget leaders, budget staff and local legislators. The tour showcased one of the agency's hatchery upgrade projects and facilitated a good dialogue about hatchery operations and needed maintenance, hatchery science, and Chinook production for Southern Resident Killer Whales.

## Wildlife Program

### **Wolf Update**

The Department has initiated a public engagement process that will propose the development of a post-recovery Wolf Conservation and Management Plan. The evaluation of wolf translocation will be incorporated into this process. The post-recovery planning process is being initiated proactively because the Department anticipates it will likely take two to three years to complete. The post-recovery plan will guide the Department in long-term wolf conservation and management, and will evaluate various wolf management tools, including translocation. We announced public scoping for the post-recovery plan on August 1 and will hold associated public scoping open houses in September and October.

Department wolf biologists have had success this season trapping and collaring wolves. They have caught 11 wolves and deployed nine collars since May.

On July 13, the Department lethally removed a radio-collared adult male member of the OPT wolf pack. This pack has preyed on cattle on federal grazing lands repeatedly in the Kettle River range of Ferry County. Removal of wolves from the OPT pack was reauthorized on July 10 after Department staff confirmed a livestock depredation by the pack on July 6.

Three of 27 known wolf packs in Washington have been involved in depredation activity in 2019; 89 percent have not had any livestock depredations documented this year.

### **The Lands Showcase Initiative Success**

The Lands Showcase Initiative, which was a concerted effort to better communicate the value of Department lands, was closed out as a biennium initiative as of July 15. This Initiative was successful in reaching its stated goals including a market survey of awareness and attitudes about Department Lands, a message playbook, pilot application of the message pilots to five Land units, facilities inventory collection and database development, social and traditional media, and website content, including standard visitor maps. The messaging developed was integrated in many ways including media interviews, website content, legislative fact sheets, news releases, social media, etc. During the Initiative, there were 27 media stories covering 12 wildlife areas, and many more social media posts highlighting the value and diversity of benefits

of our lands. The enterprise data management will live on in a 2019-2021 Initiative and the messaging work will be integrated into outreach materials moving forward as a course of standard business. We are particularly proud of the partnership between the Wildlife Program, Lands Division, Public Affairs, and the Marketing team in the Licensing Division in the collaborative success of this Initiative.

### **Merrill Lake Acquisition Celebration**

A celebration of the newly acquired Merrill Lake Unit was held at the property in Cowlitz County on June 21. Region 5 staff coordinated with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) in coordinating the celebration. RMEF was a key partner in keeping the original landowner engaged, purchasing and holding the final parcels until our grants became available and donating 32 acres to complete the transaction. This incredible addition to the Mt. St. Helens Wildlife Area includes prime forested and riparian habitats totaling nearly 1,450 acres available for the public to experience.

### **Heart of the Cascades Landscape Purchase Complete**

On June 28, the agency acquired the NJK property in Kittitas County adding 1,603 acres to the Wenas Wildlife Area. The property is one of the last pieces in the Heart of the Cascades project securing protection of the public-private checkerboard ownerships in the central Cascade Range. This forested habitat in the transitional zone of the east Cascades is rich in plant and animal species diversity. South Fork Manastash Creek provides critical rearing and spawning habitat for federally listed steelhead and other native fish. This property will be utilized as a migration corridor for elk. Funding was provided from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Section 6, and two grants from the Recreation and Conservation Office Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program.

### **Blue Mountains Wildlife Area Planning**

The Blue Mountains Wildlife Areas Management Plan was completed in July. It covers three wildlife areas totaling 77,240 acres in the southeast corner of the state. The three wildlife areas are Asotin Creek and Chief Joseph (in Asotin and Garfield counties), and W.T. Wooten (in Columbia, Garfield, and Walla Walla County) which altogether have ten units. Parts of the wildlife areas are in five main river systems: Snake, Grande Ronde, Asotin Creek, Tucannon, and Walla Walla.

The general region is semi-arid and consists of open slopes, canyons and valleys, which are comprised of upland grasslands and meadows, dry forests, and woodlands at the highest elevations. The range in elevation provides many types of habitat and recreational opportunities. Nestled within an area of federal land and working lands, much of the wildlife areas were established to provide habitat for big game winter range, as well as habitat for fish and other wildlife. Endangered Species Act-listed bull trout, Chinook salmon, and Snake River steelhead are present on the wildlife areas.

The Blue Mountains Wildlife Areas offer exceptional hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities, and a unique and diverse landscape to enjoy, with its hills, canyons,

grasslands, forests, riparian areas, rivers and streams, abundant wildflowers in the spring, and diversity of fish and wildlife species. Elk and deer are the primary big game that are hunted, along with small game and upland birds. A world-class steelhead fishery on the Snake River attracts visitors to the Chief Joseph Wildlife Area. Along with the typical hunting and fishing, many people camp, raft, hike, ride horses and mountain bike, take pictures, gather berries, mushrooms, and shed antlers, and generally enjoy this remote and rugged location. In addition, W.T. Wooten provides a popular recreational trout fishery and camping near several man-made lakes off the Tucannon River.

### **Lands Forest Management 10,000 Acres Benchmark**

In late June of 2019, the agency surpassed 10,000 acres of forest thinning on Department lands. The Management Strategy for the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife's Forests was adopted in June of 2014. The Department manages over 200,000 acres of forest, many of which have been degraded by prolonged wildfire suppression or the timber management practices of previous landowners. The strategy calls for restoring degraded forests to improve wildlife habitat, improve resiliency and reduce wildfire risks. The total treated by the end of June was 10,272 acres. To date 5,499 acres were commercially thinned and 4,773 were non-commercially thinned. Where ecologically appropriate, thinned forests are maintained with prescribed fire. Approximately 3,932 of the commercially thinned acres have also been treated with prescribed fire.

## **Fish Program**

### **Sturgeon**

Below Bonneville Dam, the Department collaborates with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to conduct annual stock assessments of the lower Columbia River white sturgeon population. A population status update is presented annually to the commission during the winter months. Recent data suggests an increase in the over-size portion of the population; however, low relative proportions of juveniles in the population has managers concerned about low productivity and poor recruitment. Sea lion predation is also considered an ongoing concern for the lower Columbia sturgeon population.

A new (updated) commission policy for the lower Columbia sturgeon population was adopted January 25, 2019 (C-3001). The purpose of this policy is to provide consistent management guidelines that promote a healthy population and provide sustainable fisheries.

Since 2017, the Department has worked with ODFW to manage for a limited white sturgeon fishery in the lower Columbia, targeting a 3-5% harvest rate on the legal size slot (44-40" FL). Via commission policy, sturgeon harvest has a split allocation: 20% commercial fisheries and 80% sport fisheries.

In 2019, an 11-day retention season was opened in the lower Columbia estuary from May 13 to June 5. The total harvest was 2,737 sturgeon, or 92% of the total quota allowance. Co-managers are considering a 2- to 3-day fall opener from Wauna Power lines to Bonneville Dam in late-September to early-October.

## **Salmon Fisheries**

Salmon fisheries in Puget Sound started in May and anglers have seen some really good fishing for both Chinook and resident coho in the early part of the fishing season. A majority of the Chinook seasons kick off in July, and anglers have seen some decent fishing in places like Seiku, the San Juan Islands, and in the Tacoma area. Our most popular Chinook fisheries in the Seattle area (Marine Area 10) and the west side of Whidbey Island up to Port Townsend (Marine Area 9) kicked off July 25 with over 12,000 angler trips on the first four days of the fishery. Marine Area 9 reopened on July 30 for Chinook and will be reevaluated after the weekend.

## **Summer Chinook Fisheries**

Summer Chinook salmon fishing opened in the Rocky Reach Pool, the Entiat River, and Chelan River on July 16 and in the Brewster Pool above Wells Dam on August 1. Fishing is focused in areas where returns of hatchery-origin fish are high, in surplus of broodstock needs, and have minimal impacts to wild-origin fish. The entire Columbia River was closed to summer Chinook salmon pre-season due to very low projected run forecasts. During the North of Falcon meetings back in March, Fish Program staff informed the public that if runs improve or returns to local hatcheries are surplus to broodstock needs that fishing seasons would open in-season. Returns to the Entiat National Fish Hatchery, Chelan Falls Hatchery, and Wells Hatchery have met broodstock goals and the surplus is available for harvest by recreational anglers. This is a great example of region and headquarters staff using the best available data to open these terminal area fisheries and help the economies of the upper Columbia River.

## **Recruitment**

Recruitment is currently underway for the Region 6 Regional Fish Program Manager position. Hope to have it filled by the end of August.

## **Region 2**

### **Fires on Department Lands in Region 2**

Region 2 has felt a few impacts of the summer fire season on agency lands. Though there have been no large scale fires in the northern part of the region, the 9,000-acre fire in lower Crab Creek in Grant County last month damaged a significant amount of shrub steppe and riparian habitat. We are still assessing the extent of the damage and what, if any, restoration work can be done to help the habitat to recover. The cause is still under investigation.

## **New Aquatic Invasive Species Vessel and Trailer Washing Station**

A Recreation and Conservation Office-funded Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) washing facility for boats and trailers has been constructed at the Region 2 office and is available for use to clean contaminated boats in eastern Washington. The first of its kind in the state, this facility will allow boats and trailers with potential AIS contamination to be cleaned by trained Department staff upon appointment. Additional stations are planned in the state. For now we have at least one location where a thorough job of clean-up can be done in an efficient manner, and using a system where the contamination is not simply washing into the ground, rather, contained for disposal by the system which captures the contaminated water and material for later controlled disposal.

## **Northern Leopard Frog Population Surveys Planned**

Over the last few weeks, Region 2 wildlife biologists have been preparing for a large-scale Northern Leopard Frog survey at Columbia Basin Wildlife Area. A large survey effort was completed in 2014, from which important population structure and occupancy data was collected. The Department will replicate that survey in August 2019 to determine the current status of frog populations near Potholes Reservoir. Volunteers will be a vital part of this effort.

## **Region 2 Director Participates in Western States Governors' Water Council Meeting**

Regional Director Brown worked with the Department of Ecology and Chelan County in presenting to the Western States Governors' Water Council meeting in Leavenworth. The presentation informed the group about the work by the state agencies and Chelan County that is occurring and intended to improve in-stream flows in Icicle Creek, known as the *Icicle Strategy*. This small river has a shortage of water, especially in drought years, and the proposed projects have the potential to double flows in the stream during drought years. The Council has governor-appointed members from states as far away as Kansas and are interested in the work being done in Washington to find solutions to water supply problems for people and for fish.

## **Summer Chinook Fishing in the Upper Columbia**

Though run size projections for upper Columbia River summer Chinook were forecast to be below escapement targets, passage at mid-Columbia dams has indicated there are sufficient number of returning hatchery fish for a limited recreational fishery in only certain sections of the upper river. Staff are continually assessing the passage and harvest data to monitor the fishery. We are also exploring additional opportunities in select stretches of the river, where additional site-specific "bubble" fishery(s) could be appropriate without harming escapement needs.

## Region 3

### **Swift Water Rescue**

Officers Scherzinger and Peterson responded to a call for assistance from the Sheriff's Office involving a swift water rescue on the Yakima River just upriver of the Department's Ringer access and boat launch. The call involved two subjects stuck on a downed tree (sweeper) in the middle of the river. Due to the swiftness of the water, they could not move. Department Police Vessel 61 was launched with Officers Scherzinger and Peterson and a Kittitas Sheriff's Deputy. Officer Scherzinger was able to maneuver the vessel in between the downed trees and nosed the bow into where the subjects were clinging to the tree. The subjects and their small dog were able to board Vessel 61. They, along with the rest of their party of seven people were safely returned to the boat ramp. This is another example of two law enforcement agencies working as a team to better serve our constituents.

### **Region 3 Land Acquisition**

On July 12, the Department, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Forterra completed a transaction permanently protecting 4,475 acres in the foothills of the eastern Cascades west of Yakima. The Department used funds from a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Section 6 grant and a mitigation agreement with Pacific Power to secure 3,552 acres. Forterra purchased the remaining 923 acres and will hold them until the agency purchases them next year using funds from the Recreation and Conservation Office's Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program. The property is positioned in the transition zone between the dry forest to the west and the shrub steppe to the east creating an incredible amount of habitat diversity. Adding to this diversity is more than seven miles of the south fork of Cowlitz Creek. Habitat for mule deer, elk, Neotropical migratory birds, butterflies, bats, coho and Chinook salmon, and bull trout is now protected forever. Outdoor recreationists have been using the primary road that bisects the property to access state and federal lands further into the Cascades for decades. This acquisition ensures the public can enjoy these resources for generations to come.

## Region 6

### **WDFW Partners with Ducks Unlimited to add 1,100 acres of land to benefit wildlife and recreationists near Westport**

In close partnership with Ducks Unlimited, the Department recently finalized the purchase of 1,100 acres of land near Westport in Grays Harbor County. The Department will manage the new property as an addition to the Elk River Unit of the Johns River Wildlife Area for the benefit of wildlife and people. A second phase to purchase an additional 600 acres is expected to be finalized by the end of the year. The property features diverse natural resources, including large freshwater and saltwater wetland areas and old-growth Sitka spruce trees. A variety of wildlife use the

area for year-round habitat, including several species of waterfowl, Roosevelt elk, black-tailed deer, and black bears. The site will also provide additional recreation opportunities, including hiking, birding, and big-game and waterfowl hunting. Public access will initially be on a walk-in basis from the perimeter of the property, as plans to improve access are ongoing.

The process to purchase the property began three years ago with the intention to buy a total of 1,750 acres. Ducks Unlimited and the Department secured funding for the first phase to purchase 1,100 acres last year. Partners have secured additional funding for the remaining 600 acres through a grant application to the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office. The finalized transaction for the second phase of the purchase is expected to be completed by the end of 2019.