

Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission
Position Statement:

2021-23 Operating Budget Request

Adopted: August 21, 2020

Washington State expects a \$9 billion shortfall in state tax revenue over the next three fiscal years (SFY2021 and 2021-23 biennium) associated with the devastating impacts of COVID-19. In order to prepare for this expected shortfall, the Governor's Office requested cabinet agencies to submit budget options that would reduce their State General Fund appropriations by 15% and urged non-cabinet agencies to also participate.

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) recognizes the immense toll the COVID-19 pandemic has on people's lives and livelihoods. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is participating in this state budget reduction planning effort.

The FWC requests that the Governor's Office and the Legislature consider the following as they make decisions to balance the state's budget:

Investing in WDFW provides an exceptional financial return to Washington. WDFW was appropriated \$94 million of State General Fund revenue in the 2017-19 biennium. A 2016 analysis by the Washington Department of Revenue estimated fishing, hunting, and watchable wildlife activities would deposit \$340 million to the State General Fund in that same biennium—resulting in a significant return-on-investment. Activities managed by WDFW collectively result in billions of dollars of economic activity each year, fueling an outdoor-based economy in Washington that rivals the impact of information technology and aerospace companies.

Approximately 25% of the Department's budget is invested in operating its 80 hatchery facilities. Hatcheries provide important mitigation for lost habitat, conserve depleted runs, and support treaty obligations. Hatcheries support commercial and recreational fishing and provide an important bridge in the recovery of wild runs. Despite their role in recovery and their contribution to local economies, a number of salmon and trout hatcheries are identified in the Department's response to the budget reduction planning exercise. The Department simply cannot plan for this level of loss of State General Fund without including hatchery closures, given the amount of money invested in hatcheries and the daunting size of this assignment.

WDFW is not currently funded at a level to fulfill its mission; further cuts would be devastating. It is estimated that natural resource agencies and partners are currently expending 16% of what is needed to recover iconic salmon and steelhead. WDFW has 5% of the funding needed to fully implement the State Wildlife Action Plan to conserve species that need intervention. WDFW has fewer commissioned officers in 2020 than were employed in 1993 – too few to effectively patrol and enforce Washington's fish and wildlife laws. Operations and maintenance on wildlife areas is approximately \$20 per acre, while the need is estimated to be \$52 per acre. WDFW cannot meet society's expectations at the current level of investment.

This past session, the Legislature addressed a long-standing structural deficit, which brought appropriations backed by revenue in line with expenditure authority—we are grateful for this resolution. In the past few biennia, WDFW balanced its budget in this difficult climate deferring critical infrastructure needs, such as maintenance at hatcheries and wildlife areas, and delaying equipment replacement.

WDFW is also anticipating \$8 million in funding shortfalls in other revenue sources in the 2021-23 biennium, not associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, and is further requesting State General Fund to maintain associated services.

WDFW's mission can't afford to take two steps back. Southern Resident Killer Whales are on the brink of extinction. Threatened salmon runs continue to trend downward. Treaty reserved fishing rights may be at risk as well as the state's Treaty obligations to deliver on salmon recovery and increased hatchery production. Climate change exacerbates species recovery and habitat restoration. We are at a time when we need Washington policy makers to lean into funding today's conservation challenges, not step away from them. The consequences of these reductions are stark and will result in a permanent loss of Washington's biodiversity.

Washingtonians rely on WDFW's services. As society grapples with a global pandemic and adapts to a "new normal," WDFW's services are in high demand. The "Great Outdoors" provides important mental, physical, and spiritual relief for people during this crisis. We are experiencing a surge in fishing participation and exploration of Department's wildlife areas and water access sites. We have seen increases of 25-30% more people using WDFW managed lands resulting in increased enforcement issues and litter. More people are staying in-state to recreate, placing increased pressure on resources and habitats. In addition, WDFW needs to address inequities in who uses resources managed by WDFW and work to make the outdoors safe and inviting for all Washingtonians. Further, this summer's economic impact due to the increased participation in outdoor recreation, and its associated tax revenue to the state, is one of the few bright spots during this recession. Thus, given the uncertainty of managing the pandemic and increased engagement in outdoor recreation, now is not the time to divest from WDFW's land stewardship, outdoor recreation, and public safety services.

In conclusion, we are early in the budget development process and a lot can change between now and the start of the next biennium in July 2021. Congress may provide a stimulus package to back-fill the \$9 billion of state revenue. State policy makers may pursue new revenue ideas, reducing the need to implement budget reductions. Or, policy makers may select an alternative path for balancing the state budget which does not cause further losses to the natural resources of the state.

We ask that the Governor and Legislature consider the long-term impacts to fish and wildlife conservation while this near-term economic crisis is addressed.