



Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date:

1/27/2023

Agenda item:

Columbia River White Tail Deer & Red Fox Periodic Status Review – Briefing, Public Hearing, Decision

Presenter(s):

Jeff Azerrad and Taylor Cotten

Background summary:

Columbian white-tailed deer were listed at the federal level in 1970 and 1973, and by the State of Washington in 1980. Since 1980, the size of the lower Columbia River Columbian white-tailed deer population has fluctuated. Surveys conducted by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated a low of only 545 deer in 2002. The population is now substantially higher, with an estimated population of 1,296 deer in 2022.

In our last periodic status review, we stated our concerns about the vulnerability of occupied habitat to threats such as climate change, emerging diseases, and a lack of secure and functionally connected habitat. At that time, we were also uncertain about the viability of a newly established subpopulation at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. Although the threats have not abated since then, we are no longer uncertain about the viability of the Ridgefield subpopulation given the encouraging projections of the viability assessment for this subpopulation. We are now much more confident that the deer at Ridgefield have established into a viable subpopulation with significant growth potential.

With this development, we believe the lower Columbia River Population no longer fits the definition of Endangered as it is no longer under “serious threat of extinction” (Washington Administrative Code 220-610-110). The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife thus recommends reclassifying the Columbia River Population of Columbian white-tailed deer to Threatened.

In 2022 the commission staff presented on and the commission voted to classify the Cascade red fox as an endangered species following an initial staff recommendation as threatened. In order to align the Endangered Wildlife WAC with this decision, staff are asking the commission to reaffirm Cascade red fox as an endangered species.

Staff recommendation:

Columbian White-tailed deer is currently classified as an Endangered Species in Washington. We are recommending it be reclassified as a Threatened species. And asking the commission to vote reaffirming Cascade red fox as endangered.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

Threatened species fall under a different WAC than Endangered with slight differences in penalties around malicious or intentional take of individuals. Columbian white-tailed deer is and will remain on the Priority Habitat and Species list. We are communicating a lower level of conservation concern with the adoption of a Threatened status and acknowledging successful management and conservation gains made in the last five years.

Cascade red fox will be added to the list of Endangered wildlife which carries protections against malicious take of individuals. As a candidate species it is already on the PHS list. We will begin work with partners to prioritize and advance conservation of the species.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

None.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

The Periodic Status Review was distributed to external partners and peers for review. After comments from peers and partners were incorporated it was open to a 90-day public comment period. We received six public comments. Four reviewers supported our recommendation to reclassify the species from Endangered to Threatened. One reviewer provided a personal anecdote on the species and their interactions on their property, and the final comment was a suggestion to improve formatting on one of the tables.

During the SEPA comment period, we received one comment from a group that also comments on the document with the same language and supporting the reclassification. And a second comment asking that we look into the origin of the species around rumors that the animals were transplanted from Puget Island. We have contacted that individual and described our translocation work which did move animals from a source population on Puget Island to other locations within the recovery area as described in the Periodic Status Review.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Briefing and Decision. We are hoping to have both the briefing and decision at this meeting which is different than how we have approached rule changes around listed species in recent years.

Draft motion language:

- 1) Move that the Columbian White-tailed Deer be re-classified as a Threatened Species as recommended by Department staff.
 - 2) Move to classify Cascade red fox as an Endangered Species.
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Post decision communications plan:

Our current management of Columbian white-tailed deer will not change and we will continue to focus on recovery of Columbian White-tailed Deer. We will share information with the public affairs team for any necessary news release as well as update the website with the final Periodic Status Review for the species.

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