



State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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November 30, 2022

The Honorable Christine Rolfes
Chair, Senate Ways and Means
303 John A. Cherberg Building
Post Office Box 40466
Olympia, WA 98504-0466

The Honorable Timm Ormsby
Chair, House Appropriations
315 John L. O'Brien Building
Post Office Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

The Honorable Kevin Van De Wege
Chair, Senate Agriculture, Water,
Natural Resources, and Parks
212 John A. Cherberg Building
Post Office Box 40424
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The Honorable Mike Chapman
Chair, House Rural Development,
Agriculture, and Natural Resources
132B Legislative Building
Post Office Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

Dear Chairs Rolfes, Ormsby, Van De Wege, and Chapman,

The FY21-23 Shrubsteppe Budget Proviso supplied a much-needed increase in investment in wildlife conservation in the face of wildfire in Washington's shrubsteppe. This landscape-scale, multi-agency, conservation effort has made great strides on multiple fronts which we are pleased to report. A report on investments to date made from the appropriated funds is attached. Work is ongoing and we expect to provide a long-term strategy for shrubsteppe conservation prior to September 1, 2023.

Even before the proviso funding was finalized by the Legislature and Governor, staff from our three agencies (the Department of Fish & Wildlife, Department of Natural Resources, and State Conservation Commission) were coming together to discuss challenges, roles, and ideas with respect to wildfire, wildlife, and human communities in the shrubsteppe landscape. In the year and a half since our three agencies have come together as the formal steering committee of the now named Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI) we have been working together to solicit projects and direct funding to short-term actions such as habitat restoration, deferring grazing in burned areas, and implementing wildlife friendly fencing.

Additionally, we are working through a robust, facilitated process to craft a long-term strategy for the shrubsteppe. We are making great strides towards conserving wildlife and increasing wildfire resiliency in the shrubsteppe.

Shrubsteppe Budget Proviso


November 30, 2022

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We appreciate your ongoing support, and it would be our pleasure to answer any questions you may have or discuss the WSRI with you at any time.

Best regards,

Kelly Susewind 
Director, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

George Geissler 
State Forester, Deputy Supervisor for Wildland Fire Management, Department of
Natural Resources

Chris Pettit 
Executive Director, Washington State Conservation Commission

Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative

Proviso to WDFW (Sec. 308 (26), BN21-23)



December 1, 2022

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Purpose

Washington’s Shrubsteppe

The shrubsteppe is an arid ecosystem found in Eastern Washington and other western states. As one of Washington’s most diverse ecosystems, shrubsteppe provides habitat for species found nowhere else in the state, such as the Greater sage-grouse, sagebrush sparrow, and burrowing owl. With an estimated 80% of historic shrubsteppe lost or degraded to development and agriculture since the arrival of non-native settlers, protecting remaining shrubsteppe habitats is more important than ever.

Here, at the northern extent of the great “Sagebrush Sea” that once sprawled across much of the American West, growing collaboration between agencies, Native American tribes, conservation organizations, local landowners, and other partners seeks to preserve and restore shrubsteppe ecosystems while supporting cultural and economic values.

2020 Wildfires

Historic fires in summer and fall 2020 burned over 600,000 acres of shrubsteppe habitat in Washington (Figure 1). The Pearl Hill, Cold Springs, and Whitney fires were particularly devastating for shrubsteppe wildlife. The fires impacted 50 percent of the area occupied by sage and sharp-tailed grouse and eliminated pygmy rabbits in one of three recovery areas within the state. Both grouse populations have seen precipitous decline in recent years, with 2022 population estimates approximately 30 percent lower than the already small estimates in 2020. The loss to the pygmy rabbit population and recovery area was significant. The recovery area burned by the Pearl Hill fire had received the most recent and extensive recovery investment. Rabbits in this area were showing promise and responding well to reintroduction efforts. The 2020 fires also caused devastating impacts to the human communities in the burn areas leaving miles of burned rangeland pasture and fencing in their wake and threatening livelihoods.



Figure 1. Pearl Hill fire devastation. Douglas County. Sept 2020 (left); April 2021 (right).

21-23BN Proviso

Responding to these catastrophic wildfires and their effects to shrubsteppe wildlife and human communities, the Washington State Legislature guided Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to restore shrubsteppe habitat and associated wildlife impacted by wildland fire through a budget proviso in the 2021-23 biennium. \$2.3 million in operating funds from the state general fund were appropriated each biennium and an additional \$1.5 million of capital funds to rebuild fences with wildlife-friendly versions in prioritized areas was made available through June 2023. The specific proviso language is in Appendix 1.

The proviso included two elements:

- A) Implementation of restoration actions, which may include: 1) species-specific recovery actions; 2) increasing the availability of native plant materials; 3) increasing the number of certified and trained personnel for implementation at scale; 4) support for wildlife-friendly fencing replacement; 5) support for private landowners/ranchers to defer wildland grazing and allow natural habitat regeneration.
- B) Formation of a collaborative group process representing diverse stakeholders and facilitated by a neutral third-party to develop a long-term strategy for shrubsteppe conservation and fire preparedness, response, and restoration to meet the needs of the state's shrubsteppe wildlife and human communities.

WSRRI

Taken together these two proviso elements are the foundation of the Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI; the Initiative). **The primary purpose of the WSRRI is to benefit Washington's shrubsteppe wildlife**, particularly in the face of increasing frequency and intensity of wildland fire, recognizing and acknowledging the shared benefit to human communities.

WSRRI is collaborative. It is led by a tri-state agency coalition between the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC), and Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR). WSRRI is informed and advised by the diverse interests of Washington's shrubsteppe landscape, including Tribal nations and public and private partners.

WSRRI is helping create a more fire-resilient shrubsteppe landscape. Through its long-term strategy in development, WSRRI is making policy recommendations, identifying spatial priorities, and setting strategic direction to better respond to wildland fire when it occurs, and to restore habitat after fire.

Governance and Foundational Partnerships

Steering Committee

WDFW has partnered with the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) and the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to form a Steering Committee that meets regularly to make decisions and guide WSRRI actions and priorities.

The partnership between the three agencies provides different yet complementary perspectives, expertise, and resources that has greatly enhanced the process, discussions, and outcomes of the Initiative. The Steering Committee works under a consensus-based decision-making model that has been very productive. Should consensus prove unattainable, the WDFW Director holds final decision-making authority regarding the Initiative. To date, all decisions guiding WSRRI have been made through Steering Committee consensus.

Advisory Groups

Entities and partners that have a vested interest in the shrubsteppe landscape were invited to participate as advisors in the effort. Advisors are shrubsteppe landowners, land managers, and other entities that have dedicated staff or direct significant resources to the shrubsteppe landscape, and that have the capacity to commit to the Initiative process. Two advisory groups were convened, each with diverse representation from local, state, federal, tribal, agricultural, and conservation organizations. In addition to the Steering Committee members who attend all Advisory Group meetings, some Advisor entities and/or individuals participate on both groups, providing built-in continuity and information exchange between the groups.

Near-Term Action Advisory Group

The **Near-Term Action Advisory Group** informs and makes recommendations to the Steering Committee on restoration program development and implementation, including delivery mechanisms and spatial priorities. While the Proviso set the basic foundation for the Initiative, there were many details to work through in order to make the Proviso actionable and operational. More than two dozen people served on the Near-Term Action Advisory Group, with diverse representation from local, state, federal, tribal, agricultural, and conservation organizations. In addition, six technical teams consisting of subject matter experts worked to identify how to expedite the delivery of shrubsteppe restoration services on the ground. The six teams and their purposes included:

- Cultural Resources - Recommend ways to increase capacity to protect cultural resources and conduct cultural resource reviews in order to restore habitat at scale.
- Native Plant Materials – Recommend ways to enhance the availability of native plant materials.
- Species Recovery - Recommend projects for shrubsteppe species affected by the Pearl Hill and Whitney wildfires that would bolster their populations in the interim while habitat restoration gets underway.
- Deferred Wildland Grazing - Recommend best approach and explore delivery mechanisms to temporarily defer grazing to rest burned habitat and promote recovery.
- Wildlife Friendly Fence - Recommend wildlife friendly fencing program that decreases hazards and migration barriers while meeting landowner needs.

- Technical Tool - Recommend software and database solutions to inventory materials, track budget, make assignments, and conduct project planning. Provide mapping products for spatial prioritization.

Long-Term Strategy Advisory Group

The **Long-term Strategy Advisory Group's** (LTSAG) charge is to inform the development of a comprehensive conservation strategy that addresses the threat of wildland fire in the shrubsteppe landscape. Like the Near-Term Action group, the LTSAG members represent a diverse array of shrubsteppe interests and expertise. The LTSAG also has the added participation of wildland fire management and response experts. The LTSAG is facilitated by a neutral third-party entity, Triangle Associates. Three working groups are associated with the LTSAG: wildlife/habitat, wildland fire, and spatial priorities. In addition, there is an explicit connection with the Wildland Fire Advisory Group, which is chaired by WSRRRI Steering Committee member for DNR.

Near-Term Approach: Collaborative Delivery of Shrubsteppe Restoration Resources and Services

Background

Habitat restoration efforts have been underway for decades on private and public lands throughout the shrubsteppe landscape. However, these efforts had not been coordinated in a cohesive way across that landscape. When the 2020 wildfires burned, the State's collective ability to respond at the scope and scale of the impact was limited both because we were not coordinated and because we lacked the capacity and resources to respond effectively after a wildfire in the shrubsteppe. We did not have a coordinated clearinghouse that could deploy trained on-the-ground personnel to high need areas, nor did we have adequate native plant materials available to restore burned areas during the critical ecological window that occurs immediately following wildfire and before the ground freezes. Expanding our collective capacity to implement restoration, a critically important aspect of wildlife recovery work, and creating an ability to pivot resources to burned areas at an appropriate scale and within a limited timeframe, are needed.

Coordinating this effort at a landscape scale provides the flexibility needed to deliver resources to immediate needs when wildfires occur. There is often a relatively short ecological window of time immediately following a fire when specific restoration actions, such as installing native plants or seeds and herbicide application to manage the spread of invasive vegetation, are needed and will be most effective. Having crews and native plants available to quickly focus attention to priority burned areas irrespective of political boundary or land ownership is extremely valuable and was a capacity gap clearly identified just after the 2020 wildfires.

WSRRI aims to fill this capacity gap and remain flexible at the landscape scale by coordinating and sharing resources and services across ownerships. Foundational resources are focused on areas of high wildlife value where restoration efforts are most needed, regardless of land ownership.

WSRRI supports shrubsteppe wildlife and communities through a restoration service delivery program. We aim to remove barriers and bottlenecks to implementing landscape scale habitat restoration by providing resources such as cultural resource reviews, trained personnel and labor, native seeds and plants, fencing materials for wildlife-friendly versions, and supporting ranchers to enable deferred grazing to allow burned habitat time to recover.

In short, WSRRI aims to:

- Expand and enhance available resources;
- Deliver support for restoration actions by providing coordinated and shared resources and services to landowners on the ground; and
- Be responsive with restoration resources and services within the critical ecological windows that occur post fire.

The benefits achieved through a coordinated model include holistic and strategic implementation, efficiency, the sharing of technical expertise by providing a forum for discussion, and an ability to pivot to immediate threats when they occur – such as when a wildfire sweeps through. Each of the three state agencies brings expertise and capabilities to this work that we are maximizing as we work together to build and implement WSRRI.

Expanding Capacity

Informed by our Near-Term Action Advisory Group, WSRRI has put in place several elements of expanded capacity, summarized below.

Habitat Restoration

Hired WDFW Restoration Coordinator

WDFW hired a full-time restoration coordinator to provide technical expertise to develop and guide habitat restoration projects, and to oversee the delivery of resources and services for on-the-ground project implementation. Our coordinator ensures the crews, plants, equipment, cultural resource reviews, and more all get to the right place at the right time to do the right work.

Contracted with Washington Conservation Corps

On-the-ground capacity to implement restoration was a clear capacity gap identified after the 2020 fires. WDFW contracted with Dept of Ecology to secure a dedicated Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) crew for shrubsteppe priority work. WCC crews have been deployed to a wide variety of WSRRI projects including habitat restoration, burned fence removal, and building pygmy rabbit reintroduction enclosures.

Engaged Conservation Districts

We engaged directly with the state's Conservation Districts (CDs) to expand our capacity and strengthen our partnership to generate landowner interest in restoration projects. WSRRI funds also enable CDs to provide technical assistance for landowners interested in collaborating with WSRRI to implement habitat restoration projects and to deliver deferred grazing and wildlife friendly fencing project assistance as well.

Purchased seed drill

Landscape scale habitat restoration requires specialized equipment that can function efficiently over large areas. We purchased a specialized seed drill that is capable of simultaneously pressing a diverse variety of native seeds into soil at precisely the shallow depth required. Our native seed mixes include a great variety of sizes and shapes thereby posing a challenge for conventional grain drills, which are designed for uniform seeds and that also usually plant natives too deep. Being prepared with appropriate and available equipment is a necessity to respond to catastrophic events like large scale wildland fires.

Cultural Resources

As we work to restore natural resources across the shrubsteppe landscape, we must simultaneously take great care of the cultural resources present in the shrubsteppe. Expanding expertise and capacity to conduct cultural resource reviews and consult with Tribes is a clear need. WSRRI has worked to address this need in several ways including engaging directly with Tribes for their archeological services, as well as those of Conservation Districts and of consultants. WDFW is also in the process of hiring an archeologist to focus specifically on WSRRI-funded projects.

Native Plant Materials

Inadequate availability of locally adapted native plant ecotypes limits WSRRI habitat restoration efforts, which aim to restore ecological integrity of burned sites by returning them to diverse stands of native perennial grasses, forbs, and shrubs. Locally adapted ecotypes are critical for successfully re-establishing shrubsteppe vegetative communities after fire due to their unique ability to thrive in this harsh environment and because Washington wildlife are co-adapted to these native plants. Native grass ecotypes are commercially available for Washington and WSRRI has purchased a stock of this seed to be ready to respond to wildland fire events. However, because shrubs are frequently lost to fire and Washington ecotypes are not regularly available, WSRRI has partnered with the Sustainability in Prisons Project (SPP) to grow sagebrush plugs (young plants; Figure 2) and seeds. The Stafford Creek Corrections Center grew 30,000 Washington-ecotype sagebrush plugs in 2022 and 80,000 are expected to be grown in 2023. Sagebrush seed orchards are being installed at the Washington Penitentiary in Walla Walla for production in 2023.



Figure 2. sagebrush plugs grown by SPP

WSSRI support of SPP to increase native plant material capacity is complemented by SPP- Evergreen Foundation support for academic training for all incarcerated crewmembers. The shrubsteppe academic program provides interdisciplinary academic and vocational education centered on the shrubsteppe ecosystem in Washington State. Modules of study include plant propagation, nursery management, conservation biology, restoration land management, and federal and state environmental policies. These topics are explored through readings, seminars, workshops, presentations and writing assignments. The SPP investment through WSRRI brings more opportunity for those in the justice system to learn valuable knowledge and skills, connecting to our shrubsteppe landscape through their efforts to support habitat restoration.

On-the-Ground Support for Wildlife

Habitat Restoration

Habitat restoration is a WSRRI focus area. Our habitat restoration objectives are to enhance and restore wildlife habitat, with special emphasis on Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN; 43 SGCN identified in the Washington State Wildlife Action Plan occur in shrubsteppe habitats). Restoration efforts aim to expand native, perennial plant communities where they remain and re-establish them where they have been lost.

Through an open sign-up process for the 21-23BN, project proponents have been able to request use of WCC crews, plant materials, and cultural review/consultation capacity to advance shrubsteppe restoration objectives on the lands where they work to benefit threatened shrubsteppe wildlife. In addition, a limited amount of WSRRI funds has been provided to supplement projects and address needs beyond what can be accomplished with the WCC, plants, and cultural resource survey support. The WDFW Shrubsteppe Restoration Coordinator deploys the resources to specific projects and supports landowners and land managers by providing

technical expertise, facilitating cultural resource reviews, coordinating the growing and delivery of plant materials, and working to ensure crews have the guidance they need to successfully implement projects on the ground.

WSSRI is supporting several habitat restoration projects, some of which are highlighted below:

Replacing sagebrush for sagebrush obligate species (934 acres)

We planted 10,000 sagebrush plugs (Figure 3) and scattered 27,000 “seed pucks”, comprising seeds of native species embedded into a compressed disk of fibrous, hydrophilic material, on 934 acres of Bureau of Land Management land burned in the Pearl Hill fire. This area is used by Greater Sage grouse and is adjacent to WDFW’s first breeding enclosure for Pygmy rabbits.

Upland seeding on private land (~50 acres)

With logistic help from the Foster Creek Conservation District, several pastures on a ranch in Douglas County that supports Sharp-tailed grouse leks and that burned in the Pearl Hill fire are being restored. Because of the fire, these pastures have been invaded by weeds that imperil surrounding grouse habitat. Weeds are being suppressed at these sites and then seeded with a native seed mix.

Ensuring resiliency by controlling invasives after fire (~150 acres)

WSSRI is assisting a private ranch to restore native shrubsteppe habitat destroyed by the Cold Springs fire. Weeds are being suppressed along public roadways that bisect the ranch prior to reseeded to provide competition with weeds deposited by passing vehicles. Weeds invading pastures from neighboring fields are also being suppressed, to prevent impoverishment of the native stands currently in those pastures.

Enhancing CRP seed mix for increased wildlife value (~400 acres)

We are assisting a farmer by providing a seed mix containing locally adapted native species that is more valuable to wildlife than a standard revegetation mix often used. This upgraded mix will be planted on cropland that the owner is taking out of production, and that is awaiting enrollment in a USDA Farm Bill conservation program focused on stewardship of wildlife habitat.

Riparian restoration using beaver dam analogs (BDA) and post-assisted log structures (PAL) (~16 river mi.)

We are restoring riparian function to East Foster Creek in the Pearl Hill fire area using BDAs and PALS. After initial cultural resource survey work by USFWS, we have engaged an experienced contractor to install BDAs and PALS within the creek to attenuate stream flows during high flow events, trapping sediment and restoring sinuosity and critical habitat types to the channel. In



Figure 3. Sagebrush being planted.

addition, this work is to increase water tables in the riparian zone increasing plant growth, a crucially productive habitat for many shrubsteppe-dependent wildlife species.

Working Lands

The majority of the shrubsteppe landscape is in private ownership. Private landowners' role in continuing to steward wildlife and habitats is highly valued and supported by the WSRRI. The WSRRI strives to collaborate with rangeland communities affected by wildfire and support working lands in ways that are beneficial to wildlife. There are two approaches for accomplishing this being employed in the 21-23 biennium. The first is to offer support for landowners to rebuild burned fence, or retrofit fence already re-built, with wildlife friendly versions. Traditional post and wire fences use smooth top and bottom wire and other wildlife-friendly considerations to allow for unobstructed wildlife movement, while maintaining their purpose as boundary fence lines. With interior fencing, the use of virtual fence is being employed as a pilot approach. This is a relatively new technology that can control animal movement using radio collars without the need for physical boundaries such as a traditional fence. In addition to fencing support, reimbursements for hay or supplemental feed are being made to producers who defer grazing in burned areas. This deferred grazing provides critical time for burned shrubsteppe habitat to recover.

Wildlife Friendly Fence

WSRRI supports the removal and replacement of burned fence and retrofit of existing fence with wildlife friendly versions. In addition to traditional hard fences designed to be wildlife-friendly, WSRRI is actively supporting landowners piloting virtual fence in Washington (Figure 4). Virtual fences hold great promise to provide significant benefit to producers and wildlife by removing physical barriers on the landscape and providing effective animal containment using an exceptionally cost effective and wildfire resistant approach. WSRRI fence work is primarily facilitated through the State Conservation Commission and Conservation Districts.

Wildlife friendly fence accomplishments to date include:

- Over 30 miles of hazardous burned fence wire removed from the landscape
- Installation or retrofit of over 20 miles of wildlife friendly fence
- Installation of four virtual fence projects that provide coverage for over 40,000 acres of grazing land.

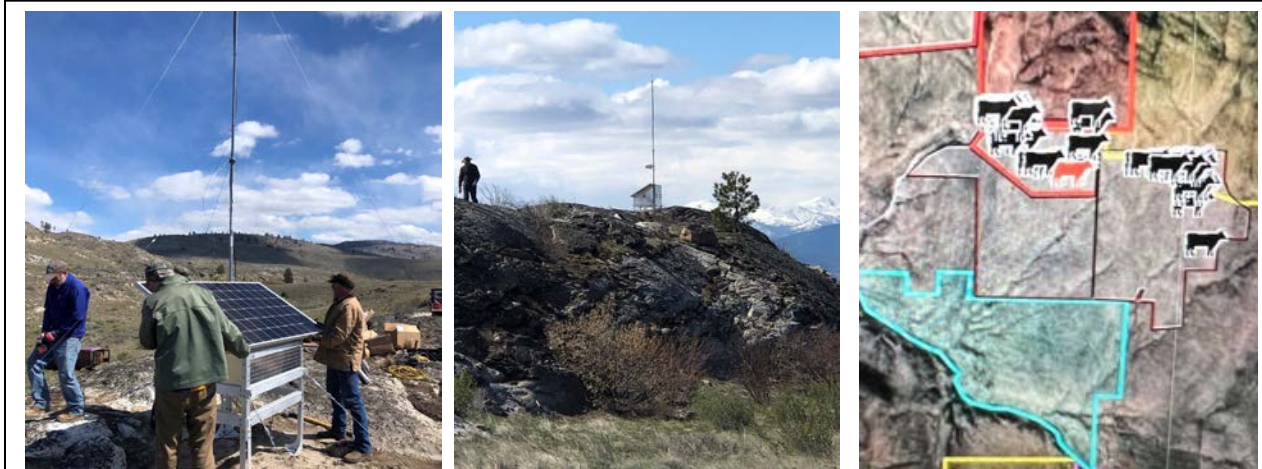


Figure 4. virtual fence receiving tower installation (left), receiving tower placement (center), and example user-interface for herd management (right).

Deferred Grazing

WSRRI offers support for ranchers wishing to defer grazing in areas impacted by fire. The objectives of the WSRRI deferred grazing program are to: 1) promote habitat recovery in burned areas; 2) avoid overgrazing of intact areas close to recently burned areas where wildlife may have relocated due to the fire; 3) support the ranching community. The WSRRI deferred grazing program is facilitated through the State Conservation Commission and Conservation Districts. The program offers reimbursements for hay or alternative pasture rental (75% cost-share, up to \$10k/yr. per rancher). To date WSRRI has supported 11 landowners and rested over 35k acres of habitat.

Species Population Management

While creating high quality habitat is a primary conservation strategy to recover shrubsteppe wildlife and is a main focus area for WSRRI funding, WSRRI funding may also be used to advance species-specific actions to bolster wildlife populations while habitat restoration takes place. These actions complement the creation and restoration of habitat. Examples of species-specific actions include species reintroductions or augmentations, specific threat abatement such as fence marking to minimize bird-fence collisions or actions to minimize predation, and species monitoring to inform adaptive management and habitat restoration.

Pygmy Rabbit Recovery

The 2020 Pearl Hill fire eliminated one of three recovery areas for the endangered Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit where reintroduction efforts were flourishing. In 2017, fire also impacted a second recovery area. The small size of Washington's pygmy rabbit population and the increasing frequency of wildland fire are interacting threats. We must ensure we have adequate population redundancy on the landscape and we must protect those populations from fire. WSRRI has supported two projects to address these threats: establishing a new pygmy rabbit recovery area and installing a fuel break at an existing recovery area.

Ensuring redundancy in species distribution is an important component of endangered species recovery. To that end, WSRRI has supported the assessment and initial steps to secure a recovery area to replace the one that was lost to the Pearl Hill fire. This work has involved a remote sensing mapping effort to identify suitable habitat conditions, land ownership, and access, followed by ground-truthing site field visits. Once potential sites are selected, formal negotiations with site landowners and outreach to adjacent landowners will occur.

WSRRI is supporting an effort to install a fuel break to protect an important occupied pygmy rabbit site. WDFW species and habitat experts met with WDNR and other fire experts as well as the landowner (The Nature Conservancy) to discuss the siting and manner of fuel break installation. This interdisciplinary conversation and site visit was particularly illuminating as each discipline contributed a unique perspective to arrive at a plan that can provide the security needed for the rabbits, the highest likelihood of fire protection, as well as the logistics needed for suppression activities should a fire occur.

Assessing wildlife occupancy of working landscapes in east-central Washington

Partnering with Washington State University (WSU), WSRRI has contributed to research assessing shrubsteppe wildlife occupancy and the habitat characteristics of occupied areas in various land strata, including burned areas, using remote camera techniques (Figure 5). WSU has also received support from the Climate Adaptation Science Center that will allow them to focus additional sampling in burned areas and to develop climate models to examine how wildlife use human-disturbed landscapes in east-central Washington and how species might respond to future climate conditions by moving through the landscape.

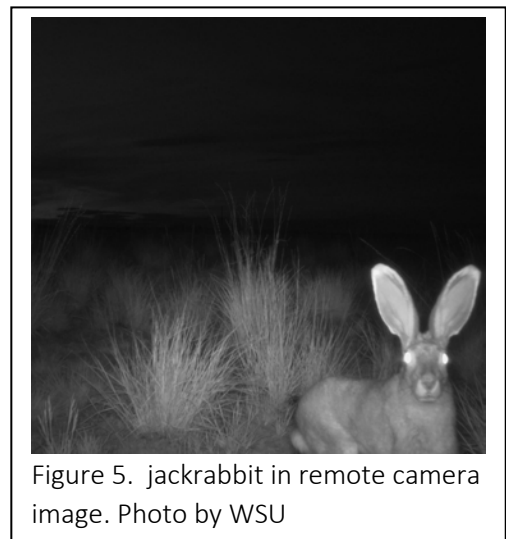


Figure 5. jackrabbit in remote camera image. Photo by WSU

Near-Term Action Next Steps

WSRRI FY23 resources were reserved until the outcome of fires during the summer of 2022 were known in order to provide the ability to provide assistance in newly burned areas. WSRRI is currently now opening a second solicitation for habitat restoration and wildlife-friendly fence projects in December 2022. Using experience gained in the deployment of resources during 2021, the project solicitation and selection process is being improved to increase the effectiveness of deploying resources most strategically in 2023.

The WSRRI Steering Committee is committed to managing adaptively to be as efficient and effective as possible in how we deploy shared resources on the ground. To reduce administrative burden, WSRRI suggested that the State Conservation Commission request \$1.5M in additional capital funds in a direct appropriation to the SCC for the 23-25 BN to continue implementing wildlife friendly fencing projects as part of our ongoing effort.

This landscape-level effort is a seed to grow. The structure and processes we have created for this cross-boundary, landscape-level habitat restoration program is a foundation upon which we can leverage other funding, mechanisms, and programs. Through our long-term strategy process, we'll

be expanding on the foundation and describing the needs to fully achieve the vision we've set in motion.

Developing a Long-Term Strategy for Shrubsteppe Conservation

Collaborating for Success

The Long-term Strategy Advisory Group (LTSAG), facilitated by the neutral third-party Triangle Associates, is working with the WSRRI Steering Committee to develop a **30-year strategy for shrubsteppe conservation and fire preparedness, response, and restoration to meet the needs of the state’s shrubsteppe wildlife and human communities**. The Strategy will address spatial priorities for shrubsteppe conservation, filling gaps in fire coverage, management tools to reduce fire-prone conditions on public and private lands, landscape scale habitat restoration needs, and identifying and making recommendations on any other threats to the shrubsteppe.

The LTSAG met seven times over 2022 to help generate and provide input on the proposed objectives, actions, spatial analysis and planning approach. This included a May 2022 field tour of the shrubsteppe. The May tour included 32 individuals traveling to Smith Draw, Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area, Anabranche Riparian Project, Bell Butte, and Spiva Butte to discuss a variety of projects, opportunities, and barriers within the



Values	Vision	Mission
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resilient Landscape • Collaborative Engagement • Multi-benefit solutions • Wildlife Habitat • Climate adaptation • Informed by science • Long-term Relationships • Address Threats 	<p>A resilient Shrubsteppe ecosystem, restored and maintained through collaborative partnership for the benefit of wildlife and human communities</p>	<p>Use collaborative processes to develop a long-term strategy for Shrubsteppe conservation and fire preparedness, response, and restoration to meet the needs of the state’s Shrubsteppe wildlife and human communities.</p>

Figure 6. WSRRI Long-term Strategy Advisory Group, May 2022 (top); Values, Vision, Mission (bottom)

shrubsteppe. The LTSAG has worked together with subject matter expert working groups and with the WSRRI Steering Committee to identify values, set a vision, define their mission, and draft goals. (Figure 6). Once goals were drafted, working groups met regularly to identify threats, and draft SMART objectives for the Strategy.



Figure 7. LTSAG working groups and Steering Committee meet in Wenatchee, Oct 2022.

The Wildlife Habitat Workgroup and Wildland Fire Workgroup began biweekly meetings in July of 2022. In October of 2022, a workshop was held in Wenatchee, Washington for the workgroups and Steering Committee to review initial objectives, discuss cross-resource linkages that need further development, and workshop potential actions to achieve from the developed objectives (Figure 7). From this workshop the WSRRI Core Actions were developed.

The Spatial Workgroup is focused on identifying spatial priorities for WSRRI actions, by adopting and adapting concepts and products previously developed in the state and in the sagebrush biome in the western United States. The workgroup is teaming with TerrAdapt to utilize Google Earth Engine to generate dynamic spatial products (maps) reflecting habitat condition and priorities for actions. Associated tools will allow decision makers to focus investments and track progress over time.

Develop the Strategy: a 6-step process

A planning approach was implemented to provide a repeatable, systematic, and documented approach for prioritizing restoration and protection and actions and location. The process was based on Advisor and Steering Committee direction to use and refine the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) Sagebrush Conservation Design (<https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2022/1081/ofr20221081.pdf>) to identify primary threats to shrubsteppe ecological integrity in Washington and develop strategies to “defend the core, grow the core,” and connect core shrubsteppe habitats within the context of the Legislative Proviso and Mission and Goals of WSRRI. This six-step process (Figure 8) is based on a foundation of goals and objectives aimed at protecting and restoring ecological integrity, managing fire on the landscape, and supporting communities and compatible land uses. WSRRI actions are aimed at achieving these goals and objectives and addressing key threats within defined geographies (spatial priorities). Key to success will be a robust monitoring and adaptive management approach. WSRRI teams are currently primarily focused on Step 4.

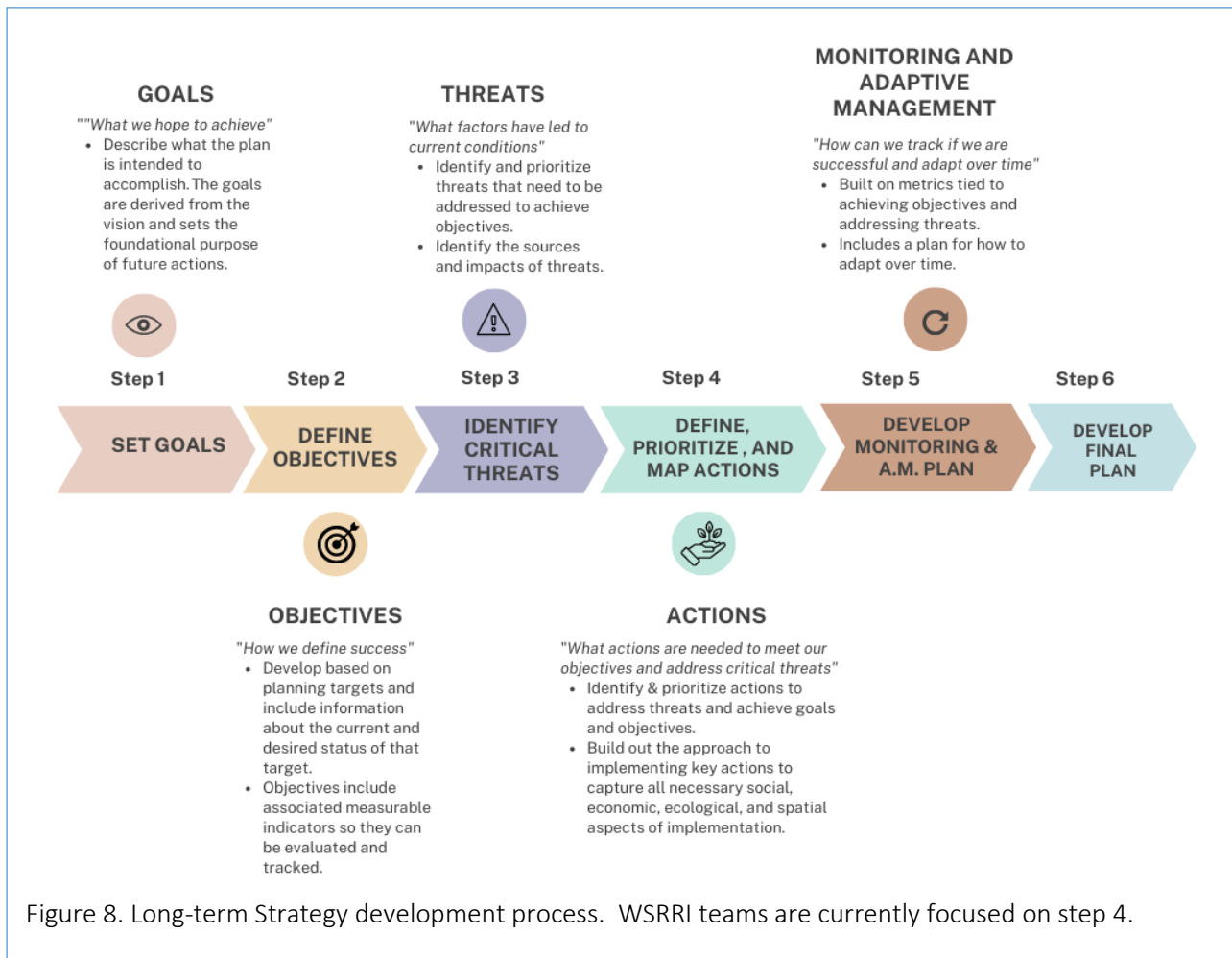


Figure 8. Long-term Strategy development process. WSRRI teams are currently focused on step 4.

Long-term Strategy Next Steps

Defining actions to achieve objectives, describing the enabling conditions needed to ensure actions can be implemented, and mapping spatial priorities will be accomplished over the fall/winter 2022-23. In the next phase of planning, subject matter experts will be engaged through *Focus Tables* and other means to describe each Core Action and develop an approach to implementing actions that captures all necessary practical, social, economic, ecological, and spatial aspects of implementation. As 2022 ends, a draft of the Long-term Strategy will be developed with recommendations and input from the LTSAG in early 2023. Also in spring 2023, the group will work to develop a web-based platform, begin a public comment period, and begin a robust review process with the LTSAG, Workgroups, and Steering Committee. Public comment are planned to close in May, along with the last meetings for the Steering Committee and LTSAG to input recommendations for the final draft of the WSRRI Strategy. Final Strategy is due to the Legislature September 2023.

Conclusion

The Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative, quite literally born from the ashes of devastating wildfire, advances a bold and collaborative approach to support wildlife and human communities of eastern Washington's shrubsteppe landscape. Working together with our Advisors, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, State Conservation Commission, and Department of Natural Resources have set in motion a landscape-scale program to respond to the increasing threat of wildland fire, conserve and restore our shrubsteppe natural heritage, and support Washington's shrubsteppe working lands. Expanding capacity and delivering resources and services on the ground in a coordinated and collaborative way to recover wildlife, restore habitat, and support working landowners has been WSRRI's primary effort. With the development of our long-term strategy, we're setting a vision and approach to expand on that effort, and recommendations to put in place the resources and infrastructure necessary to prepare, respond, and recover from wildland fire in the shrubsteppe. WSRRI work on the ground will continue as we complete and publish the long-term strategy. Our work is not finished with the publication of the strategy; it will just be beginning. Continued commitment combined with additional resources and support will be needed to realize the full vision.

Appendix 1. Proviso Language

(25) \$1,175,000 of the general fund–state appropriation for fiscal year 2022 and \$1,175,000 of the general fund–state appropriation for fiscal year 2023 are provided solely for the department to restore shrubsteppe habitat and associated wildlife impacted by wildfires.

(a) This funding is intended for the restoration of habitat on public lands as well as private lands by landowners who are willing to participate. The restoration effort must be coordinated with other natural resource agencies and interested stakeholders.

(b) Restoration actions may include: (i) Increasing the availability of native plant materials; (ii) increasing the number of certified and trained personnel for implementation at scale; (iii) support for wildlife-friendly fencing replacement; (iv) support for private landowners/ranchers to defer wildland grazing and allow natural habitat regeneration; and (v) species-specific recovery actions.

(c) The department must submit a progress report to the appropriate committees of the legislature on the investments made under this subsection by December 1, 2022, with a final report submitted by September 1, 2023.

(d) Within the amounts provided in this subsection, \$250,000 must be used by the department to form a collaborative group process representing diverse stakeholders and facilitated by a neutral third party to develop a long-term strategy for shrubsteppe conservation and fire preparedness, response, and restoration to meet the needs of the state's shrubsteppe wildlife and human communities. The collaborative may serve as providing expertise and advice to the wildland fire advisory committee administered by the department of natural resources and build from the wildland fire 10-year strategic plan. Components to be addressed by the collaborative include the restoration actions described in (b) of this subsection and on spatial priorities for shrubsteppe conservation, filling gaps in fire coverage, management tools to reduce fire-prone conditions on public and private lands, and identifying and making recommendations on any other threats. Any reports and findings resulting from the collaborative may be included in the report specified in (c) of this subsection.