



## Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

January 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, Peter Dunwiddie, Kathryn Kurtz, Maynard Mallonee, Claudine Reynolds, Cheryl Schultz, Randi Shaw, Ian Sinks, Laurie Benson (DNR), Adam Cole (RCO), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

**Councilmembers Absent:** Heather Kapust (ECY)

**DNR Staff in Attendance:** Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, David Wilderman, Tynan Ramm-Granberg, Irene Weber, Mark Reed, Ben Guss, and Michele Zukerberg (for the Skookum Inlet boundary discussion)

**Visitors:** None

Chair Heida Diefenderfer called the meeting to order at 9:31 a.m. The agenda was accepted without changes.

Chair Diefenderfer inquired about the effectiveness of the written agency reports to the council, noting that substantial agenda time has traditionally been devoted to verbal agency updates prior to the current abbreviated agenda due to remote-only meetings. Others mentioned the value of interaction with councilmembers during verbal reports. The council requested a hybrid of brief written reports combined with a fairly short agenda time for verbally reporting highlights or key items from those reports for each agency.

### Approval of the Minutes for the October 13, 2021 Council Meeting

Ian Sinks moved approval of the minutes as presented, and the motion was seconded by Peter Dunwiddie. The minutes of October 13, 2021, were approved unanimously.

### Carry-forward Items from Previous Meetings

- **Report from council member visits to Natural Areas**  
Regarding the recent Kennedy Creek acquisitions, Claudine Reynolds observed that in the general area of the acquisition she saw weeds along the access roads and was glad to see the department is requesting additional legislative funding for weed control. Peter

Dunwiddie visited Cranberry Lake at Deception Pass State Park and while it is not a natural area, he noted stabilized sand dunes and unusual flora for Puget Sound in an easily accessible spot where people can view this uncommon Puget Sound habitat.” Dunwiddie also visited Cape Disappointment State Park and noted the contrast with rapid retreat of the coastline into forested uplands. Andrea Thorpe noted that the Natural Heritage Program conducted an inventory near the west beach parking area at Cranberry Lake and confirmed rare plants and sand verbena moth habitat, which supported a planning designation of “natural area” for this area of the park. The plant community there is now identified as an element occurrence in the natural heritage database. Thorpe noted the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is studying a solution to coastal erosion at Cape Disappointment because it is threatening the jetty. Becky Brown visited Bunchgrass Meadows Research Natural Area in northeastern Washington near Metaline Falls on USFS land to view a patterned fen with her ecology class, however no plants were visible due to a recent freeze. Kathryn Kurtz went to Pinecroft NAP and sees tremendous education opportunity, with the YMCA and a plant nursery next door.

- **Update on Funding for Natural Heritage and Natural Areas Programs**  
Laurie Benson reported that the Natural Heritage Program recently received new contracts from Columbia Land Trust and State Parks. For the Natural Areas Program the governor’s budget included a one-year supplemental operating budget increase to fund weed control activities statewide, which draws down an unusually high balance in the fund that collects miscellaneous minor income from program activities, the Natural Resources Conservation Areas Stewardship Account. The governor’s budget is now being reviewed by the House and Senate.

#### Progress on Past Recommendations

- Land Acquisition Report
  - A written land acquisition report was distributed prior to the meeting featuring recent additions to Kennedy Creek Natural Area and Mima Mounds NAP, and full acquisition of a new natural area, Steptoe Butte which may contain both NAP and NRCA designations, to be determined during a public management planning process. Mark Reed noted that recent acquisitions have been a “rough go” for transactions staff due to the impacts of the pandemic on communities and workplaces. Chair Diefenderfer inquired about the status of land ownership at Steptoe Butte since both DNR and State Parks were both named grant applicants. Ben Guss said DNR is sole owner of the lands in fee, and any revenue from the existing cell towers will come back to DNR for Natural Areas Program stewardship. He reported that current income for the towers is about \$20,000 per year, and DNR staff has discussed future lease renewals increasing that amount to a market rate. Andrea Thorpe noted that State Parks is re-starting their community planning process for Steptoe Butte and they are conducting tribal outreach.
- Council-recommended Bald Hill NAP Expansion Proposal to Move Forward
  - David Wilderman presented an overview of the 2006 council-approved boundary expansion for Bald Hill NAP, including a summary of recent discussions with the timber landowner that comprises the vast majority of the proposed additional lands to be designated as natural resources conservation area.

- Cheryl Schultz recalled the original Natural Heritage Advisory Council discussion as focusing on the need to extend protection beyond the small natural area preserve to capture more balds and Taylor's checkerspot butterfly habitat.
- Wilderman showed current imagery of the site and the council-approved proposed boundary, noting that the expansion area includes grassland balds and oak community, plus what was, at the time of the original recommendation, occupied Taylor's checkerspot butterfly habitat. He agreed that protecting the meta population was a primary driver for expanding the natural area. Back in 2006 Taylor's checkerspot were using native host plants at Bald Hill instead of the non-natives they relied upon at other sites. While the population at Bald Hill appears to be gone, the Natural Areas Program, working with partner agencies, has been revegetating the natural area preserve with native species with the goal of butterfly reintroduction in the near future. Adding the expansion area would be beneficial for those efforts, and will allow for conservation management and restoration on those lands as well.
- Wilderman noted that the initial Natural Heritage Program proposed expansion area excluded some of the adjacent managed forestland, however the council approved a larger design that created additional buffer and utilized the existing timber landowner's internal road network.
- Peter Dunwiddie, who has visited Bald Hill NAP but not worked on the site, inquired about the timber landowner's intent, to sell their lands to DNR or to allow a state NRCA designation on their lands? Ben Guss, who leads the transaction for DNR, noted that the conversation with Weyerhaeuser is ongoing and iterative. It appears they are amicable to selling high conservation value lands to DNR in the expansion area, but more discussion is needed about intervening land. Guss noted that the proposed grant for the 2022 round of Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program funding will assume land acquisition. Wilderman noted that further discussions with the landowner will assure a contiguous design for acquisition lands that link the NAP to the other balds in support of butterfly reintroduction efforts if the company is not currently interested in selling all lands within the expanded boundary.
- Responding to a question about vegetation extent and quality in this area that is managed for timber, Wilderman showed the location of habitat on an aerial image and noted that some encroachment of invasives has occurred over the years following timber harvest on adjoining lands. He noted that the original description of the expansion area as having frequent recreational ATV use has changed since the landowner now, and for about the past decade, charges for recreation access to its lands. ATV use is minimal.
- Janelle Downs inquired about climbing use on Fossil Rock near the NAP. Wilderman said we don't have much information about current level of climbing use but felt it is likely reduced, or possibly eliminated, due to landowner gating and access fees.
- Guss explored the concept of continuing discussions with the landowner to determine where DNR could ultimately appraise and make an offer that might be acceptable to the seller. Wilderman used an aerial image to discuss highest priority areas within the boundary design, and the need to obtain contiguous lands now and potentially the entire site design as the seller is willing.

- Joe Rocchio shared an image of the element occurrences (EO) in the Natural Heritage Program database to address the question about whether intervening forests (between balds) had been surveyed. The database doesn't contain records from the surveys indicating they were analyzed, however he offered that given the dispersed nature of the balds it is highly likely program ecologists traversed the forested areas, and thus it is safe to assume they did not see any forest plant community that was rare, or of sufficient ecological quality, to be considered as a separate EO.
- Claudine Reynolds asked whether these prairies would be appropriate for vesper sparrow and Mazama pocket gopher. Wilderman said the area is not deemed suitable for pocket gopher due to shallow soil depth, and was uncertain about sparrow use.
- Chair Diefenderfer noted the council has asked staff on several occasions to revive languishing older proposals, and she expressed appreciation for this site being brought forward. Curt Pavola described the next steps for the boundary approval, to include public outreach, a boundary hearing, and then creating of a commissioner's order for final decision by the Commissioner of Public Lands.
- Andrea Thorpe encouraged DNR to look into Elbow Lake as a potential landscape level conservation opportunity, being an undeveloped state park just north of the current preserve. Dunwiddie noted his desire for the council to have further discussion about adding disjointed parcels to a boundary proposal. He offered that while "bigger is better," gaps in the wrong places can be a big concern. Downs added that she would anticipate the council-recommended boundary is what will be presented to the public.
- Rocchio noted that the council-recommended boundary will be brought out for public review at the hearing, and suggested that even if the timber landowner is not interest in selling all of it at this time, they may be interested in the future. In fact, he said, until recently and for many years the company had not been willing to entertain sale of the balds.
- Ian Sinks suggested that the original boundary design will be helpful with future negotiations with the landowner.
- Chair Diefenderfer asked council members if they had any concerns that haven't been addressed before DNR brings the 2006 boundary proposal out to the public. Council members expressed support. Reynolds concluded by noting, as a representative of a timber landowner herself, that acquiring and disposing of blocks of lands is easier for such businesses to deal with and to manage around than patches of endangered species and related habitat.

#### Natural Heritage Plan Review and Adoption

Joe Rocchio summarized the remaining process to finalize and approve the Natural Heritage Plan.

Ian Sinks said he appreciates how the plan is structured, including the clarity about prioritization of species and ecosystems. Becky Brown agreed, saying she enjoyed reading it, and that it was an informative document. Kathryn Kurtz noted that she is happy to see the mention of staff working with a DNR equity manager, and the added focus on education in the plan. Claudine Reynolds said this draft plan is much more expansive than the 2018 plan. Joe

Rocchio offered that the plan is currently envisioned to be updated every two years going forward. Chair Diefenderfer recognized the extensive effort of staff and council members in developing the plan and integrating information about classification and prioritization, and she suggested it may be possible to create a more limited plan in 2025 if that would help re-establish the biennial schedule. Janelle Downs asked about whether this version of the plan will guide the 2022 grant round for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program. Rocchio replied that this new plan doesn't go into effect until 90 days past the legislative session which would be after the May 3 grant deadline, so the new plan will apply to the next cycle.

Peter Dunwiddie would like to see some effort placed into this new plan being implemented during coming years, and this argues for a later date for the next plan. He would like reports back to the council about what has been successful and how that should inform the next plan. Rocchio said he will continue to reach out to the Recreation and Conservation Office as they prepare for their 2024 grant cycle.

Rocchio referenced past program communication about the plan with the Washington Association of Land Trusts, and Ian Sinks offered another group to contact, Northwest Land Camp, which is planning their regional conference. Becky Brown added that some smaller land trusts may not use this type of information currently and so any help they can receive would add value to their conservation work. Rocchio agreed, noting recent outreach to land trusts has revealed their excitement to learn that their conservation sites are included within the statewide system of natural areas.

Chair Diefenderfer called for the question, noting that any notes or minor edits could be sent to Rocchio during the next few days, and Sinks moved, Dunwiddie seconded, and the council unanimously approved the 2022 Natural Heritage Plan.

#### Council Chair Discussion of Council Mission and Goals

Chair Diefenderfer initiated a discussion among council members regarding reflections on their individual primary conservation interests and service on the Natural Heritage Advisory Council. She said her intent is to have an open discussion of the council member interests and roles, and this will be a key agenda topic for the March meeting.

Diefenderfer distributed background materials for the discussion, and she sees four main questions for each member: 1) What are the top priorities for use of our time?, 2) What is the experience, education and knowledge that you individually bring to the council?, 3) What area of our work are you personally interested in (which may or may not be from past work)?, 4) What questions do you have for the upcoming meeting with Commissioner Hilary Franz that touch on the council's role? Chair Diefenderfer noted she has requested time with Commissioner Franz soon.

Claudine Reynolds wondered if a council role would be to advocate for passage and implementation of the Keep Washington Evergreen proposal. Diefenderfer agreed that council members have expertise that could help the commissioner meet her vision. Kathryn Kurtz wondered if it is possible to ask for the commissioner to meet with the council annually. Reynolds added that a council field trip could be structured about topics of shared interest. Becky Brown suggested the position of commissioner of public lands is well-suited for integration of goals and activities of various agencies, such as prescriptions for post-fire management, or encouraging good management practices across agencies. Laurie Benson said the roles question would a good conversation for the future and the best topic now, during

legislative session, might be the nexus of the council and the goals of the Keep Washington Evergreen legislation.

#### Boundary Expansion Recommendation for Skookum Inlet Natural Area Preserve

David Wilderman gave a presentation for a proposed boundary expansion of Skookum Inlet NAP. The expansion would add 291 acres to the current boundary for a total of 455 acres. The purpose is to increase protection of the ecological functions that are important to the site's primary features, e.g. sediment movement, water quality. It would also provide buffer from threats including invasive species and potential future development. The original boundary from 1980s was drawn very close to the saltmarsh features and did not incorporate ecological functions and buffer the way we would today based on current science. The proposed boundary includes intact shorelines, additional saltmarsh, diked pasture that could be restored to saltmarsh, mudflats, and portions of the main channel. Squaxin Tribe lands were not included per input from the tribe prior to the boundary design.

Chair Diefenderfer inquired about the extent of change in this site's primary features. Wilderman said no data is available specific to whether the saltmarsh features are expanding or shrinking, but based on past aerial imagery there does not appear to have been a significant change either way.

Peter Dunwiddie asked if additional lands west of the proposed boundary were considered. Wilderman said additional lands around the proposed boundary were analyzed but not included due to a lack of hydrological connection, especially past the railroad corridor running adjacent to the existing NAP. He noted that the goal of acquisition at the end of the inlet would be to remove dikes and restore the current agricultural field to estuary.

Chair Diefenderfer noted the value of protecting the full hydrologic column and its connection with preserve features, important in maintaining ecological function especially with respect to sediment movement and dynamics.

Chair Diefenderfer asked for a motion on this proposal. Peter Dunwiddie moved approval of the proposed boundary recommendation, and Janelle Down seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

#### "Keep Washington Evergreen" Legislation

Csenka Favorini-Csorba, DNR Senior Policy Advisor, offered an overview of Commissioner Hilary Franz's "Keep Washington Evergreen" bill for land conservation, including the "essential conservation area" (ECA) work envisioned for the Natural Heritage Program. The goals are, by 2040, to restore forest health on 1 million acres, conserve 1 million acres of working forest, and reforest 1 million acres.

Favorini-Csorba noted the intersection of Keep Washington Evergreen with the work of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council, focusing on avoided land conversion and also reforestation. To help guide priority setting, the Natural Heritage Program would scale up their work to identify "essential conservation areas" statewide with funding under the legislation.

Chair Diefenderfer asked about the process to "scale up" natural heritage data for DNR's use, and Favorini-Csorba said the program's information would be an additional layer added to existing DNR forest health and resilience planning to better inform those efforts and help focus on priority action areas.

Ian Sinks asked how much climate change and carbon sequestration are figuring into the proposed work. Favorini-Csorba responded that while the legislation is primarily a forest conservation proposal, many other conservation goals will be incorporated into the analysis, with no current, predetermined list of criteria and a stakeholder process in the legislation to help focus DNR's work.

Peter Dunwiddie inquired about the tools DNR will utilize for analysis. Favorini-Csorba said DNR will be inventorying existing tools and identifying gaps. She said land acquisition will be part of the program, noting that another DNR legislative proposal is seeking to create a \$25 million capital budget for rapid respond acquisition.

Becky Brown inquired about DNR's definition of "forest" for this work, asking if others such as shrub lands and scab lands could be included. Favorini-Csorba said the focus at this time is on forests, on forest land and those stakeholders.

Chair Diefenderfer wondered whether the new DNR efforts would be a separate program, akin to the Natural Areas Program, or integrated into existing DNR programs. The latter was confirmed, noting that some of the work will be housed in DNR's Small Forest Landowner Office. The initial mapping of forested areas and reforestation needs is due this December, with the full plan due in December 2023.

Diefenderfer asked how the planning might prioritize open forestlands that may have lower timber value but be at risk of conversation. Favorini-Csorba noted the goal 1 million acres of working forest conserved in the legislation, however acknowledged that while less emphasized, non-working lands will be an evolving part of the program. She also noted that DNR continues to discuss the legislation with stakeholders who are raising issues about focus on working versus non-working forests. Sinks asked whether "working forests" means "industrial" or broader. Favorini-Csorba said this is still being refined in the legislation.

Dunwiddie asked about the timeline for accomplishments under this new effort, near term or longer? Favorini-Csorba offered that the department and stakeholders will be front-loading the selection of tools for near-term focus on initial efforts while also establishing actions into 2040. She added that DNR currently has tools for conservation of state lands, so actions to avoid conversion will focus more on private landowners, while reforestation will likely apply to all ownerships.

Chair Diefenderfer wondered whether reforestation was envisioned to be native plants or typical replanting. Favorini-Csorba said it doesn't mean reforesting after harvest, and this question will be addresses as assessments are conducted the plan development is written. The plan will include spatially explicit data for both avoided conversion and reforestation. Diefenderfer noted that the council has expertise to offer in spatial planning, and Favorini-Csorba said DNR's advisory panel will bring together both members of existing councils and also invited experts as needed.

*Csenka Favorini-Csorba departed at the top of the hour for a scheduled meeting.*

Janelle Downs asked Joe Rocchio how much support DNR would provide the Natural Heritage Program to accomplish this work in a six-month timeframe. Rocchio noted he presented the concept last year to the council about potentially creating essential conservation areas along with a concern not about the funds or staffing but short timing of the initial prioritization of areas to analyze. Rocchio said the Natural Heritage Program goal would be to create ECAs statewide, and beyond forests. Not all this information would be used for the Keep Washington Evergreen project; however it would be useful added information when identifying potential

future natural areas, and for projects with conservation partners. Laurie Benson echoed the sentiment that the initial focus will meet DNR's planning needs, but she will continue to support and advocate for ECA development about broader ecosystem types.

Becky Brown agreed that this type of information would be valuable for land trusts. Rocchio said it is likely that the information gap after the initial forest ecosystem analysis could be closed with a second year of Natural Heritage Program work to rank and map the full extent of conservation areas.

Chair Diefenderfer observed that, from an ecological process and structure standpoint, it appears this ECA work could foster a non-linear change in the creation of natural resources conservation areas to feature larger landscape-scale conservation that includes several ecological systems. She said she's happy that the work of the Natural Heritage Program is being recognized by the department in this project.

### Adjourn

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

MINUTES APPROVED: June 14, 2022