



NATURAL HERITAGE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

June 14, 2022 • 9:30 am – Noon
Remote Web-based Meeting

Councilmembers in Attendance (all via conference call): Heida Diefenderfer (Chair), Becky Brown, Kathryn Kurtz, Maynard Mallonee, Claudine Reynolds, Ian Sinks, Laurie Benson (DNR), Adam Cole (RCO), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Heather Kapust (ECY), Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

Councilmembers Absent: Janelle Downs, Peter Dunwiddie, Cheryl Schultz

DNR Staff in Attendance: Tim Stapleton, Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Mark Reed, Bruce Schneider

Visitors: None

Chair Heida Diefenderfer called the meeting to order at 9:32 a.m. The agenda was accepted without changes.

Approval of the Minutes for the January 19, 2022, Council Meeting

The meeting minutes as drafted were moved for approval by Kathryn Kurtz and seconded by Chair Heida Diefenderfer. The council approved the minutes unanimously. [The March 23, 2022, council meeting was cancelled.]

Carry-Forward Topics from Previous Meeting

Council member visits to natural areas:

- Kathryn Kurtz visited Mirabeau Park in the City of Spokane Valley, which is adjacent to the DNR Pincroft Natural Area Preserve.
- Chair Diefenderfer noted that a planned trip to Cypress Island Natural Area had been cancelled.

Update on Funding for Natural Heritage and Natural Areas Programs:

- Tim Stapleton noted that all staff were quite busy during spring writing and submitting Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program grants. Budget proposal development and internal review is a primary task currently, and he expects that conservation funding will be included as part of DNR's request.
- Joe Rocchio reported State Parks contracted with the Natural Heritage Program to conduct Ecological Integrity Assessments of high priority areas at Mount Spokane State Park. The contract provides the program \$142,817 to conduct the work.

- Laurie Benson reported on DNR’s Keep Washington Evergreen proposal to the Legislature. While the legislation did not pass last session, elements of the proposal are planned for inclusion in future proposals or programs, not yet fully formed as a concept for legislative consideration.
- Stapleton added that the monthly meetings of the Board of Natural Resources are a good source of information and discussion about DNR proposals, both in presentations and discussion. They are available streaming live or recorded at TVW.
- Chair Diefenderfer inquired about the implication of older forest conservation, noting that Commissioner Hilary Franz mentioned the Essential Conservation Area approach for the forest selection and an added staff position in Natural Heritage for this analysis. Stapleton said the new position would be a generalist supporting program work and freeing existing staff to conduct the analysis. The department is continuing to explore other fund sources for this work.
- Diefenderfer inquired about the role of land trusts in utilizing ECAs, and Rocchio suggested a high likelihood of this since natural area designation isn’t the right fit for many conservation opportunities. Ian Sinks offered that with 32 land trusts in the state we need to figure out how to get ECA information out to them and also learn what type of information they already have about their lands. Stapleton also sees the added value of land trusts utilizing ECAs. Sinks added that in addition to the national land trust meeting in Oregon next week, he would inquire about opportunities to connect with members of the Washington Association of Land Trusts. Sinks expressed concern about the current funding and staff limitations for the Natural Heritage Program to scale up the ECA concept to include the work with land trusts.
- Chair Diefenderfer asked for brief updates from agency members of the council:
 - Janet Gorrell said the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) update and, if passed, the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (RAWA) would heavily impact Department of Fish and Wildlife work, with the intent being to include plants in the next SWAP (2025). More discussion and partnership with Natural Heritage will be needed to achieve this.
 - Adam Cole noted the extensive work currently for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program 2022 grant round, with discussion underway about the appropriation for the program. He said a number of categories have fewer applicants than previous biennia while others are robust.
 - Heather Kapust said National Coastal Wetland grant applications will be submitted today. Since another Tarboo-Dabob project upstream on Tarboo Creek is included she will connect with DNR to discuss this application. New funding through the America The Beautiful Challenge is available but so far is not generating much interest, suggesting the program needs more outreach and planning for find good project matches for future rounds. In addition, Natural Areas might offer some good projects for Coastal Zone Management funding that will be coming soon, and she’ll reach out to the program on this topic.

Natural Heritage and Natural Areas Historical Overview

Joe Rocchio presented a slide show overview of the history of the DNR Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program, including the mandates outlined for each Program through legislation, the role the of NHAC, the primary programmatic objectives of each program, and how DNR’s natural heritage and natural areas work fits into a larger effort to

conserve biodiversity, dating back to the early days of The Nature Conservancy. Councilmember questions and clarifications were discussed.

Discussion of Council Focus and Goals

Chair Diefenderfer engaged the council in a discussion of their interests and goals for service on the council, with “any and all ideas welcome” and with the following preparatory questions:

- What in your view are the core roles and responsibilities of the council?
- What do you wish to bring to those roles and responsibilities in terms of your personal education, experience, and interest in the future?
- If the Commissioner of Public Lands were to ask you for "big, bold ideas" for advancing state lands conservation and the Natural Heritage and Natural Areas Programs that are relevant to the council's charge, what would it be?

Chair Diefenderfer noted that she met with Commissioner Hilary Franz and several of her executive staff, council member Laurie Benson. The commissioner said the first two years of her administration focused on the threats and impacts from wildfire and declining forest health, and now she is focused on a third threat, which is land conversion or changes in use. Natural Areas will be a component of Keep Washington Evergreen. She lamented that almost no one knows about DNR natural area sites, and she was one who, even after working in similar land conservation efforts for several years, did not know of the DNR program. She posed the question that needs to be addressed: What are the value of natural areas? Diefenderfer offered that it was good to hear top-level agency leaders speaking passionately about conservation work.

Commissioner Franz challenged the council to propose a “big and bold goal” for Natural Heritage and Natural Areas. Benson said the idea is to engage the council and then work with program and agency staff to communicate the goal back to the commissioner. Benson also noted the commissioner had the new Natural Heritage Plan in hand during the meeting, and that she was excited about it. Diefenderfer added that Commissioner Franz said land use and reforestation were topics on the minds of several legislators who are not typically involved in conservation issues.

Becky Brown offered several topics that might guide a big and bold proposal: inclusion of land trusts, DNR and tribes in the suggestion, a focus on diversity, and focusing more program attention on restoration. She said tribes are very interested in restoration plantings after fires, to avoid planting non-natives that are not beneficial to the ecosystems. More communication could avoid working against good conservation, such as agencies creating beaver habitat while the state Department of Transportation is trapping them out. Regarding diversity, the lack of a Natural Heritage zoologist limits information necessary for restoration, and including all of the people of the state means perhaps adding a tribal representative to the council. She said the Natural Heritage Program and information are good but we are entering dynamic times and bringing multiple issues together is important.

Ian Sinks suggested conserving representation of all ecosystems in the natural areas system, noting that achieving the goals described in the Natural Heritage Plan is a bold action. Should we have a dashboard for achieving adequate conservation? He said that given climate change the pace of our achievements is not fast enough. For his role on the council, he wants to build Natural Heritage capacity to connect with land trusts. He would like to see greater understanding of Natural Heritage methods and conservation direction, and build capacity to

achieve plan goals through the land trusts. He wants to see Natural Heritage help land trusts identify the features on their lands and bring those sites into the statewide network.

Janet Gorrell suggested the programs and council communicate more to the public and demonstrate what we do, building broader understanding of the critical role of biodiversity conservation.

Andrea Thorp agreed with the need for action in achieving Natural Heritage Program conservation goals, while noting that those don't always overlap with agency goals. What's needed is broader appreciation for natural heritage methodology. She expressed concern about new priorities being added to the Natural Areas Program without added resources. She suggested that the backlog of potential natural area preserves may represent a lack of will to move new sites forward. She would like to see support for the Natural Areas Program to manage what we have, and then add resources for any new goals or shift in mission. For the council, she said the core work, natural heritage methodology, is important and needs to be shared out to other organizations, noting that all council members can be advocates.

Adam Cole offered a combined goal of building appreciation for our work by doing it well, seeing that increased appreciation would be rewarded with additional resources. For himself as a member of the council, he shares information about successes and advocates for the programs. He offered to bring additional ideas from the council to the Recreation and Conservation Office if the council sees a role for the agency.

Tim Stapleton said he's looking for funds for the programs to deliver our work and share the science that guides us. If new funds come to Natural Heritage to help lead on new agency initiatives such as climate change, then that will highlight Natural Heritage as part of a "big and bold" idea.

Claudine Reynolds offered appreciation to Natural Heritage and Natural Area staff for the thoughtful work they do, with encouragement to consider how the council can support both programs and connect multiple agencies that may have differing core missions. As an example she noted her service on the Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Working Group which is as an avenue to amplify each member organization's efforts and share expertise. On the Natural Heritage Advisory Council, she sees tribal heritage topics and tribal involvement as a missing piece. She raised the question of how to partner with federal agencies, so that Natural Heritage can play a larger role in conservation on federal lands, as federal agencies are often looking for resources and support.

Joe Rocchio was asked to comment on current interaction with federal agencies in establishing new natural areas, which he acknowledged could be an area of increased effort or focus. He reviewed the historical connection at the founding of the Natural Heritage Program, working closely with the U.S. Forest Service to establish the methodology and system of federal research natural areas (RNAs) and state or private natural area preserves (NAPs). While the program still works together at the staff level, federal agencies typically do not have the staffing capacity to propose and designate new natural areas sites. In the past, federal scientists played a significant role in the assignment of Natural Heritage Plan priorities but federal funding cuts have essentially stopped this collaboration (especially for the ecosystem priorities). The issue doesn't appear to be unwillingness to establish new natural areas, rather a staffing/resource limitation to complete the work necessary for those designations to occur. For

example, a few years ago during a meeting about a potential new Research Natural Area on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, USFS managers indicated they supported the proposal but did not have the staffing capacity to complete the inventory work and subsequent administrative work to complete the designation. However, they did indicate that the Natural Heritage Program could do the work for them.

Maynard Mallonee invited council members to come to his property to see how, as a private landowner, they think outside the box for managing lands in support of lupine and a rare butterfly by changing their farm activities based on the needs of the species, called “regenerative practices.” He said the agriculture community is shrinking due to development and asphalt. He noted that a local community group, via the county signing up under the Growth Management Act for a Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP), is doing good conservation management on working lands. A recent visit by the Natural Heritage Program botanist showed that the rare plant population on his land increased more than 30 percent in 12 years. Mallonee highlighted how management planning for Mount Spokane led to controlled grazing and deferment that helped control invasives while benefitting native plants. Chair Diefenderfer suggested hundreds of local volunteers may be an avenue for broad communication. Mallonee agreed saying that some new residents on former farmlands are not interested in farming but willing to allow others to management the lands for multiple benefits.

Laurie Benson acknowledged the good suggestions already brought up and proposed incorporating needs the programs already know they have into any proposed big, bold goals. She highlighted the need for the agency to better tell the story of the important work that the Natural Areas and Natural Heritage program staff are already doing, and the significance of natural areas across the state in light of climate change ad loss of biodiversity. She also acknowledged the lack of consistent tribal perspective and knowledge being part of the process and conversations about new natural areas.

Kathryn Kurtz recalled she was approached to be on the council as an education advocate, and that’s an important part of her role. Advocacy for additional DNR program funding, via legislative efforts she participates in, also is a connection to the goals of her own organization, Pacific Education Institute. She sees tribal representation on the council as important since tribes are co-managers of the land. She also sees a role for a representative of impacted communities, differing from the typical background of council members. Finally, she is wondering about a more formalized role on the council for both education and land trust voices, and perhaps recreation. For a big, bold concept, she sees biodiversity as also a health disparity concept, with more biodiverse areas being healthier. Building biodiversity in impacted areas is not in the council’s purview, but council member expertise could help others increase biodiversity. For the Natural Heritage Program she pointed to the need to be part of the review process for Keep Washington Evergreen. For the Natural Areas Program, the need is to fully fund staff in every region and then add staff, such as project coordinators, to meet with partners to plan and coordinate in communities, which ties into workforce development as her organization has done by partnering with land trusts and school districts.

Chair Diefenderfer noted that 2022 is the 50th Anniversary for passage of the Natural Area Preserves Act, which led to creation of the Natural Heritage Program. She said perhaps “refocusing on the core” is the main mission, not addressing a backlog of projects or work. One idea would be an annual photo contest, focusing on NRCAs, to create a poster for schools and others. Benson weighed in with a site visit “passport” concept that might be managed by

DNR's communications staff, and with this focus the agency would experience a sense of urgency for natural areas preservation. Diefenderfer encouraged the council to think about ways to be helpful in any new process, but not get in DNR's way for implementation. The council might bring projects forward, maybe in talks with region staff where the core science is there but not the momentum. Would there be instance where data is needed, or other helpful assistance? Also, with connections to educational institutions, perhaps council members could help secure funds for research, both to students and for program staff.

Chair Diefenderfer opened the conversation to more general discussion among council members and DNR staff.

Curt Pavola noted the good ideas discussed in the meeting and reflected on past efforts to take such steps, however before the meeting he created a statement that he feels would speak to staff in Natural Areas who are struggling to prioritize their work given tight resources and lack of time: Solely from a land management perspective, when you're starved for oxygen, your other goals and desires are not relevant. Pavola said this reality isn't intended to stop new ideas, however adding new efforts that don't come with additional funding does have an impact on overburdened staff. He recognized that an added focus for the Natural Areas Program doesn't need to be program-wide or statewide, it could be focused on specific sites with specific partnerships that are quick to implement, highlighting previous discussions about sites across the state with the Pacific Education Institute. Kurtz clarified that the educational work can also involve getting program work done, with knowledgeable students and experienced crews.

Janet Gorrell noted that the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife needs the assistance of a forester for projects, so perhaps that is a partnership opportunity. She raised the question of whether the Natural Heritage Program needs to be within the Department of Natural Resources. Chair Diefenderfer noted natural heritage programs in other states are located in various agencies. Stapleton agreed that other states have different locations for natural heritage but the program is a natural match for the other expertise within DNR, and also for DNR's land management structure that supports employees in communities throughout the state. He added that being within DNR means the programs act as peers and work with other staff in a structured way, across other programs and regions.

Brown said that if any other agencies have missions at odds with natural heritage goals, then it would be hard to make progress. She feels that no matter who the partner agency is for the Natural Heritage Program, they would achieve more if they have good natural heritage information to work with.

Chair Diefenderfer and Stapleton discussed next steps, to include a follow-up conversation during the council's October meeting.

Kurtz wondered if the council's thinking could be added to DNR's next biennium budget request. Benson noted that some of today's comments are captured by the budget proposals the programs have already put forward for consideration, with current management discussion focusing on messaging and funding amounts. One next step is gaining support with stakeholders for both programs. Stapleton agreed that the council's discussion serves as support for the several proposals already submitted.

Chair Diefenderfer suggested a follow-up meeting with Commissioner Franz. Following discussion, a subcommittee of the council was established to clarify communications from today's discussion for a briefing with the commissioner. The group includes Diefenderfer, Kurtz and Sinks.

Other Business / Comments from the Public

Chair Diefenderfer noted that no members of the public were on the conference call.

Adjourn

Chair Diefenderfer concluded the video conference call at 1:16 pm.

MINUTES APPROVED: October 19, 2022