NATURAL HERITAGE ADVISORY COUNCIL

Meeting Minutes: Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

March 27, 2020
9:30 am – 11:40 am
Call-In Meeting

Approved Meeting Minutes

Council Members in Attendance (all via conference call): Peter Dunwiddie (chair), Kathryn Kurtz, Claudine Reynolds, Cheryl Schultz, Randi Shaw, Ian Sinks, Becky Brown, Heida Diefenderfer, Janelle Downs, Maynard Mallonee, Brock Milliern (DNR), Adam Cole (RCO), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Heather Kapust (DOE), Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

Staff in Attendance: Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Keyna Bugner, Dave Wilderman, and Tynan Ramm-Granberg, Jake Kleinknechte, Walter Fertig, Bec Braisted

Chair Peter Dunwiddie called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. The agenda was accepted without changes.

Approval of Minutes from the October 22, 2019, Meeting

Chair Dunwiddie reminded DNR to follow up on items in the council's minutes, such as information requests by councilmembers during the meeting. No corrections or edits were offered, and the minutes were moved as written by Heida Diefenderfer, seconded by Kathryn Kurtz. The minutes were approved unanimously.

Carry-Forward Items from Previous Council Meetings

- Report from NHAC member visits to Natural Areas

No visits were made. Councilmembers were encouraged to let the local land managers know prior to site visits. Natural Heritage Program staff will send an updated digital map layer to the council, showing DNR natural areas ownership and species/habitat polygons. The digital map layer can be viewed in Google Earth and Google Chrome on desktop or mobile devices.

- Update on Funding for Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program

Brock Milliern noted no changes to the program budgets since the last briefing. DNR will soon begin working on a request package for consideration by the Legislature. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the funding landscape will be very different, and hopefully by mid-June or July the department will have a better understanding about how much, or whether, to seek new funding next legislative session. Joe Rocchio reported on two new grants received by the Natural Heritage Program via the Puget Sound Partnership, one to expand the use of Ecological Integrity Assessments and the other to develop an online map viewer in order to share locations of rare species and ecosystems.

- Recommendation updates – Marsh Creek, Steptoe Butte, Onion Ridge, Upper Dry Gulch.

Rocchio noted that Natural Heritage staff chose to focus on the proposed Onion Ridge Natural Area Preserve for the 2020 round of Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) grants. Rocchio will continue working with DNR Northwest Region staff on the Marsh Creek proposal. For the proposed Steptoe Butte natural area, Milliern summarized the question he posted to the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board, of which he is a member; basically looking for ways to use the conservation funding to also acquire existing revenue-earning facilities on an inholding that will help provide a revenue stream for ongoing land management such as weed control. DNR is keeping in touch with the current landowners and should have preliminary appraisal figures by the June council meeting. Chair Dunwiddie noted the council's interest in seeing this project completed, and that ongoing site management funding was a topic from the October 2019 meeting needing more council discussion, to assure support for stewardship of all natural areas.

Andrea Thorpe inquired about acquisition progress at Upper Dry Gulch Natural Area Preserve. Milliern noted a pending State trust land exchange with the adjacent private landowner, and the likelihood that the proposal will be considered soon by the Board of Natural Resources. Natural Areas staff are working on a 2020 WWRP acquisition grant, which would also include properties to the south that were included in the original Natural Heritage Advisory Council recommendation. DNR Southeast Region staff will be briefing the county commissioners, which has been delayed due to the coronavirus crisis. Chair Dunwiddie suggested looking at how Whited's milkvetch (*Astragalus sinuatus*) is doing following the fires. Keyna Bugner noted this analysis would be conducted during April-May, along with annual surveys on DNR trust lands and adjacent Bureau of Land Management ownership. David Wilderman noted an uptick in the plant's population on the NAP last year; it seems to be rebounding following recent fires.

Review Proposed Boundary for Onion Ridge p-NAP

Rocchio presented boundary considerations and options for Onion Ridge proposed Natural Area Preserve (pNAP) in Stevens County. He noted that he discovered a few editorial and content errors in the recommendation and would be submitting a corrected version to the council. The pNAP supports numerous ecosystem types (dry to mesic forests, balds, and wetlands) and a rare plant species identified as priorities in the Natural Heritage Plan. The Washington Natural Heritage Program (NHP) first submitted a recommendation for establishing the Onion Ridge Natural Area Preserve in 1991. The site never was acquired by DNR natural areas. During the past year DNR's northeast region reached out to indicate they were supportive of a natural area in the Onion Ridge area, although requested a review of the 1991 proposed boundary due to areas with planned timber sale units. Natural Heritage Program staff revisited the site during August 2019 to determine current ecological conditions of the site. Following this review the program is proposing a boundary that excludes several forested areas within planned sale areas that do support high-quality examples of common forest community types, but which have a low priority in the 2018 Natural Heritage Plan. The highest priority elements found at the site (wetland and grassland communities) remain included in the 2020 proposed NAP boundary.

Ian Sinks asked how the Bureau of Land Management lands to the north are managed. Rocchio has remotely observed no logging, but has asked Kim Frymire at BLM for information about their management and to confirm their interest in conservation of their lands.

Councilmembers reflected on the current proposed boundary versus the original boundary recommendation from 1991. Why are the forested areas being excluded? Rocchio said the current boundary reflects the willingness of the DNR region staff to move forward with the NAP designation at this time when they are planning timber sales. The region is supportive of taking this NAP proposal out to the public if the areas of high interest to the region for timber harvest are excluded. Curt Pavola noted that the BLM has some of these forest community types, and we ultimately may be able to expand the boundary to the north to include all BLM lands.

Diefenderfer questioned the exclusion of one wetland on the eastern boundary edge, and Rocchio and Tynan Ramm-Granberg noted it is not documented as an element occurrence in Natural Heritage's database nor identified as a 2018 Natural Heritage Plan priority. Discussion ensued concerning location of the ponderosa pine community, transition areas between forest and balds, and rock outcrops. Becky Brown raised questions about the extent of required buffers for forestry and suggested squaring off lines to include buffer. Rocchio clarified that the wetter areas to the west were reviewed but have invasive species and other impacts that prevent them from being priority plan elements.

Rocchio offered the observation that Natural Heritage staff have focused this proposal on the priority plan elements. Although the overall acreage of many of the forested elements included in the 1991 boundary has been reduced in the 2020 proposed pNAP boundary, they are all still represented in the 2020 boundary. The region staff had also shared their view that the recent creation of Trombetta Canyon NAP included some of the same forest elements, but the Natural Heritage Program does not have enough detail about that site's forested communities to make a determination of their overall quality and acreage for each that may be protected at that site.

Claudine Reynolds and Diefenderfer noted that a wolf pack is in this area. Rocchio will look into available information about the wolf pack and requested any information others had.

Thorpe added that the issue of conservation for wide-ranging species routinely comes up when designating natural areas. How much can a natural area support any wide-ranging species? Generally natural areas may include a small portion of species habitat but it is difficult to ascertain the importance of these sites to the overall conservation of wide-ranging species. The conservation significance of DNR's natural areas for species with more restricted ranges or wide-ranging species that regularly use specific sites for part of their life-history are easier to identify. For example, Thorpe noted, the proposed Wanapum NAP would conserve most of the population of striped whipsnake in Washington state.

Reynolds suggested referencing the value of this portion of habitat for the wolf pack since it is substantial for them within their range, and Rocchio will gather the necessary information, such as checking the Priority Habitat and Species site-specific information from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Janet Gorrell also will share other databases that might be relevant. Sinks and Brown also noted the controversial nature of wolf conservation in the area. Sinks cautioned that putting too much emphasis on the wolf packs could result in a negative response to the pNAP proposal.

Chair Dunwiddie stated his discomfort with harvestable areas being removed; five areas removed, and nothing new included, which he doesn't view as give-and-take or compromise. Cheryl Schultz noted a trend over the years to look at broader landscapes and wondered about the prevalence of the forest community elements and whether this site was important to assure their protection.

Diefenderfer inquired about DNR land transfers, and Pavola described the Trust Land Transfer process, noting replacement lands may not be in the local area, meaning the local DNR harvest levels, jobs, and business activity would decrease locally if the harvests are cancelled. Brock Milliern added that high timber value is a key to Trust Land Transfer, and eastside forestlands aren't generally considered high (80%+) timber value and so are not as likely to be included in a transfer package.

Brown noted fire management as a key concern, and suggested that the public will want DNR to address the agency's views on fire suppression.

Chair Dunwiddie expressed uncertainty on how to proceed because in the past the council has had full consideration of an ecological boundary which the Natural Heritage Program then might modify for social-political needs. Milliern said if the council is more comfortable with the 1991 boundary, then they could support both and let the department staff determine a final boundary through the public process. Janelle Downs stated her preference for the ecological boundary and protecting the additional forestlands. Pavola suggested that if just the original boundary were presented to the public, the department would be setting up local DNR staff to be in opposition to the proposal; however having both boundaries would allow for options and a full discussion. Responding to a question about another option to expand the boundary to the north, Rocchio said the Natural Heritage Program would need more time to analyze the BLM lands in this area, as well as other examples of similar forestlands already conserved. Rocchio noted that this area also has additional DNR trust lands that would need to be inventoried.

Chair Dunwiddie called for a motion. Following additional discussions about past council actions regarding ecological boundaries and modified/adjusted boundaries, Downs proposed a motion for the proposed Onion Ridge Natural Area Preserve: "The Natural Heritage Advisory Council recommends the 1991 proposed NAP boundary as the optimal ecological boundary, and further recommends the 2020 boundary as an option for a minimum boundary to protect priority wetland and bald habitats. The council supports work by Natural Heritage Program to further examine Bureau of Land Management lands to the north of the 1991 boundary for potential inclusion in the proposed NAP." Brown seconded the motion.

Diefenderfer expressed gratitude for Chair Dunwiddie finding a path forward. The motion was approved unanimously, with no abstentions.

State Parks Review of Ginkgo State Park as a Potential NAP

Andrea Thorpe reviewed the role of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council in advising the various state agencies, as well as State Parks' process of classifying areas through park planning. [See meeting handout.]

Thorpe requested the NHAC consider a portion of the site for NAP designation, enabling State Parks to also pursue this potential designation within their planning process. State Parks will need collaboration with the Natural Heritage Program to adequately map rare plant locations and rare and high-quality ecosystems located throughout the park. Ideally, this work might be concluded in time for the June council meeting, but in these times that may be an optimistic goal. After council discussion, Chair Dunwiddie summarized the council support he senses for the potential NAP designation and urged Thorpe to reach out to councilmembers for a site visit(s) prior to the June meeting, or as soon as possible.

Address Council Questions about Pre-Meeting Materials

- Progress on Past Recommendations

See handout for recent land acquisitions at DNR natural areas.

- Expansion of White Salmon Oak NRCA (just FYI)

Sinks inquired about the proposed boundary not including a fairly large area of oak woodlands on the west side. Keyna Bugner replied that this area, including the trail access, is on private timberlands, and the company in the past has not wanted their property included within the boundary. Sinks offered to inquire with the landowner. Kathryn Kurtz also knows the landowner and offered to help with contacts if needed.

- List of likely 2020 WWRP Grant Applications

Not available due to work disruptions due to coronavirus response. Pavola will email the list to the council when approved.

- Other Items

Chair Dunwiddie asked about the climate change related work that the Natural Heritage Program report mentioned related to USFS and BLM sensitive species as well as connectivity needs for natural areas. Rocchio noted that David Wilderman, Walter Fertig and Jake Kleinknecht conducted a review of natural areas supporting federally listed species and identified their management needs in light of potential climate change impacts. Peter recalled council discussions about including climate change considerations when designating/managing natural areas and suggested the council should see the report. Fertig will send the report/link to councilmembers.

Diefenderfer noted staff vacancies in the Natural Heritage Program, and while understanding holding off on hiring due to the coronavirus crisis, she, as a council member, also is concerned about long-term degradation of the Natural Heritage Program. For example, she is concerned that additional information about proposed natural area preserves (such as the Onion Ridge fauna information) will come ad hoc from individual councilmembers, and not integrated into the council's decision making. This should be noted for Onion Ridge, and hopefully the Legislature will notice this need and fully fund the Natural Heritage Program.

Planning for June Council Meeting and Field Trip

Staff discussed the typical field trip timing and uncertainty of operations under the current emergency order and work restrictions. Potential field trips are: the Spokane area including the environmental education access opportunity at Pinecroft Natural Area Preserve and the DNR lands within Dishman Hills Natural Resources Conservation Area, or a trip to the original preserve designated at Dabob Bay combined with a visit to the later forested upland additions in the surrounding conservation area.

The council decided to plan for a one-day meeting in June, hopefully in-person in Olympia, with a combined meeting and site visit in late September or early October. Both field trip options will be developed for further discussion at the June meeting. Pavola will poll the council for availability.

Other Business / Comments from the Public in Attendance

No public were in attendance.
Sinks noted that the council had discussed management planning, and he wants to get back to this discussion. Pavola said materials would be ready by June.

Adjourn

Schultz moved to adjourn. Diefenderfer seconded. The conference call was ended.

MINUTES APPROVED: June 4, 2020