



Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

June 21, 2023 • 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.
Natural Resources Building, Olympia, WA

Councilmembers in Attendance: Heida Diefenderfer (Chair), Becky Brown, Janelle Downs, Peter Dunwiddie, Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Kathryn Kurtz, Claudine Reynolds, Ian Sinks, Adam Cole (RCO), Heather Kapust (ECY), Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn (DNR)

Councilmembers Absent: Maynard Mallonee, Andrea Thorp (Parks)

DNR Staff in Attendance: Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Mark Reed, Rebecca Dzieza

Visitors: none

Chair Heida Diefenderfer called the meeting to order at 1:07 p.m. and reviewed the agenda. Peter Dunwiddie suggested adding council site visit reports to the agenda, and the revised agenda was adopted.

Approval of the Minutes for the January 11 and May 4, 2023, Council Meetings

Council members reviewed the January 11 and May 4 council meeting minutes. Peter Dunwiddie moved approval of the January 11 minutes and Becky Brown seconded; and Claudine Reynolds asked for a clarification in the May 4 minutes and with one text clarification she moved approval of the May 4 minutes and Dunwiddie seconded; both sets of minutes were approved unanimously.

Council Site Visit Reports

- Peter Dunwiddie reported visited Killebrew Bog, owned by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), which protects rare plants and plant communities on Orcas Island. It is difficult to get to and can be dangerous walking on the bog mat.
- Ian Sinks said the Columbia Land Trust stewardship program held a retreat recently in which Carlo Abbruzzese showed them around Lacamas Prairie NAP. Sinks noted the site has changed quite a bit over the past 10 years, with development surrounding the preserve. It highlighted the benefit of buffering site features from development pressures. He noted that the group saw a plant that was new to them and it served as a reminder for conservation land managers to get to know your sites over many seasons and years; slow down and fully understand what you're protecting.

- Becky Brown took senior capstone students to survey plots and found abundant species at Steptoe Butte Natural Area. Curt Pavola added that the designation as “natural area” is interim for this preserve because the site was created with the requirement that a site-based management planning process would determine which areas of the site should be designated as preserve, or alternatively as conservation area. He also noted that the conservation features on the Department of Natural Resources ownership extend into a portion of Steptoe Butte State Park.
- Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn reported on a visit to Cypress Island NRCA and Lummi Island NRCA with the department’s Northwest Region staff.

Assistant Division Manager Oral Report

- Joe Rocchio reviewed a written report from Tim Stapleton who was not able to attend the meeting. Topics included: Progress on a DNR budget request (“concept paper”) to include topics developed by the council subcommittee, the recent DNR Recreation and Conservation Division all-staff meeting, a legislative update, and the two Natural Heritage Advisory Council vacant positions.
- Peter Dunwiddie inquired about whether any council members are up for reappointment soon. Curt Pavola noted that three council members’ terms conclude on June 30, 2024: Janelle Downs, Kathryn Kurtz, and Maynard Mallonee.
- Rocchio read a short summary from the report regarding a recent DNR Recreation and Conservation Division all-staff meeting.
- Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn reported legislative approval of the entire “Scientifically Based Conservation” budget request for Natural Areas and Natural Heritage, which the department will use to strategically staff the programs for success into the future. Several department programs, including Natural Heritage, are experiencing turnover and growth, which means bringing a lot of new people up to speed on program missions and building foundational knowledge. For Natural Heritage and Natural Areas it means assuring everyone understands the process of establishing natural areas. Few DNR natural areas have management plans, and from our all-staff meeting we heard about limited capacity for planning in light of workloads for ecologists and land management staff. For Natural Heritage the focus is on adding scientists, and for the new Recreation and Conservation Division overall the need is to for full funding of support staff to complete the establishment of the division.
- Janet Gorrell asked about how the new funding will shape Natural Heritage work. Ohlson-Kiehn said that both the Scientifically Based Conservation and HSIL (Puget Sound Habitat Strategic Initiative Lead) funding will allow more focus on core Natural Heritage work than some of the project-focused grant funding generally supports. Rocchio noted the need for a program zoologist but questioned how that position might fit with near-term funding and deliverables, such as the funding for development of Essential Conservation Areas (ECAs) which is considered “core work.”
- Rocchio stated his appreciation for the all-staff meeting, which allowed everyone to reconnect and also meet new people. He noted that when the second Natural Heritage botanist joins in July, four out of the seven Natural Heritage staff will have been with the program less than two years.
- Chair Diefenderfer inquired whether decisions for hiring new staff have been made. Ohlson-Kiehn said the division is working with feedback from program staff and defining

priorities, including finishing re-organization of the division and addressing a staff classification change that occurred years ago and needs resolution.

- Chair Diefenderfer asked Dunwiddie what the priority for a program zoologist was when the previous person retired. Dunwiddie said it was a priority at that time and wondered about the priority now. Rocchio replied that current priorities are guided by legislative funding for specific products, which limits the ability to use the new funding for a zoologist (ECA work is almost entirely focused on rare plants and ecosystems). Dunwiddie questioned why a second botanist was hired, in lieu of a zoologist and Rocchio noted that the program's federal Section 6 funding for rare plant work exceeds the capacity of a single botanist so the program is using those funds to support the addition of a second botanist position. He noted that the Natural Heritage Program doesn't have the flexibility in current funding to hire a zoologist since current funds have explicit strings attached to them.
- Dunwiddie asked if the new money is aligned with Natural Heritage work, and Janet Gorrell offered that it is, with ECAs being a priority in support of the HSIL-funded WDFW/EPA efforts implementing the Puget Sound Partnership action agenda.
- Ohlson-Kiehn added that Natural Heritage is receiving funding to support an ecologist to assist in assessing potential recreation impacts on ecological resources. This funding is responsive to concerns from tribes about the impacts of recreation on state-owned lands. Follow-up on this concern will include conducting an assessment and development of options or pilot projects. She said the Commissioner of Public Lands and directors of agencies have met to initiate this effort.
- Chair Diefenderfer asked how the zoologist's prior work added to conservation behind the scenes. Rocchio replied that most wildlife is tracked by WDFW and DNR's work added focus on specific species. Thus one future goal could be to supplement WDFW's work, as well as maintain species rankings and inform Natural Heritage Plan updates.
- Gorrell said WDFW is beginning to develop the 2025 State Wildlife Action Plan for species of greatest conservation need, and some species may not be caught with WDFW's current criteria.
- Chair Diefenderfer noted that the council wrote to the Commissioner when the prior zoologist retired encouraging that the position be filled. Dunwiddie added that while the Natural Heritage Program is seen largely as plant focused, it is also ecosystem focused and the ecology of systems should be discussed are part of Natural Heritage Advisory Council work. Rocchio agreed, pointing to the zoologist as being the connection to WDFW's data, most importantly as part of establishing natural areas. The program would want the position to target a niche not being covered by WDFW programs, and also to specifically develop natural heritage rankings and priorities. An example would be to work with NatureServe on rankings throughout the system, which is not currently happening.
- Gorrell said they do have invertebrates expertise, but what is lacking is a relationship to coordinate work flow.

Budget "Concept Paper"

- Kathryn Kurtz said she works often with Clare Sobetski, DNR Outdoor Education and Training Program Manager, who is building a new program for the department. Kurtz offered to work with DNR to build capacity for workforce development, including in

natural areas but not if it impacts the core work of Natural Heritage and Natural Areas. Kristen Ohlsen-Kiehn observed that Clare's budget concept paper was environmental education focused, while Tim's version included education plus workforce development. She said the department submitted a "conservation corps" funding package but was under-funded. In 2011 the Legislature decided to have the Department of Ecology manage the corps programs, with the thought that agencies then wouldn't compete with each other for federal funding. Now the department is looking at internal needs and envisions a different model of corps management to achieve goals across DNR programs, and incorporating Natural Areas/Natural Heritage work into the corps mission. The department will develop a legislative budget decision package for the 2025 budget session of the Legislature that will take a different track than Clare's environmental education work.

- Ian Sinks wondered if these efforts met the Commissioner's interest in big ideas. Ohlson-Kiehn confirmed that the work we've done has been met with a budget concept paper, and now the components of it will be promoted during the next session, and beyond.
- Chair Diefenderfer clarified that both Sinks' and Kurtz's organizations previously have been written into the workforce development/environmental education proposals. Kurtz said only some of the concepts were funded, and she clarified that workforce development is seen as within DNR but there's a question about environmental education being housed elsewhere, such as the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). Sinks confirmed that land trusts statewide are wanting to be partners in this work.
- Bruce Schneider said he previously worked at OSPI and he's been involved in GIS competitions, helping with STEM education in schools. He has continued this at DNR, whether as part of his Natural Heritage job duties or as extracurricular activities. He's seen limited success in having GIS work incorporated into curriculum. Kurtz supported this observation, seeing this type of involvement by DNR as providing expertise but not serving to develop and incorporate curriculum content.

Acquisition Update

- Mark Reed reported on one property acquisition at Stavis NRCA. He added that he will be creating future reports to show the acquisition process and timeline for sites that have grant funding.
- Heather Kapust noted, for perspective, that the first appraisal for this recent Stavis NRCA acquisition was in the mid 2000s.

Council Member Reports and State Agency Reports

- Adam Cole, Recreation and Conservation Office, reported on a successful legislative session, with the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program funded at a historical level of \$120 million. RCO just finished a 5-year recreation plan, equity study, and other strategic efforts, and we will see both small and major shifts in how RCO prioritizes projects, likely focused more on the recreation side but it could affect conservation programs. He noted that next week's Recreation and Conservation Funding Board meeting agenda includes a lot of interesting topics, including funding potentially available for the Lacamas Prairie Natural Area acquisition grant if the project is added back to the list next legislative session. At the meeting their legislative coordinator,

Brock Milliern, will review what was and wasn't funded, with conservation projects mostly funded and recreation projects being more competitive.

- Heather Kapust, Department of Ecology, reported that her agency also fared well this past legislative session with new funding and new positions, including in the areas of climate change resilience and related measures. Ecology just held the state's second cap-and-invest auction, with results pending. She said that State Parks is consolidating into the Department of Ecology headquarters building in Lacey. Ecology now has a drone program, with hiring underway. The goal of the drone program is to create several years of site monitoring as well as communications; telling the conservation or restoration story.
- Janet Gorrell, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, announced that their biodiversity decision package was funded at \$24 million for the coming biennium and \$31 million ongoing. The agency is still determining how to deploy funds to build program capacity, and she'll be presenting a proposal to the Fish and Wildlife Commission soon. One focus will be forage fish, smelt, oysters and other shellfish, funding 25 FTEs ("full-time equivalents") at about \$13 million. Some of the new funds in Gorrell's biodiversity program likely will be passed along to conservation partners. WDFW is hiring a Wildlife Action Plan coordinator to build a new state plan.
- Joe Rocchio, DNR Natural Heritage Program, reported that Sienna Wessell will start on July 16 as the program's second botanist.
- Curt Pavola, DNR Natural Areas Program, reported on the success of a special legislative appropriation during the past biennium that added about \$200,000 in one-time funding from the NRCA Stewardship Account for weed control on natural areas. During the last half of the state budget biennium, funding for an additional 15 sites to be treated for weeds was added to the program's typical target of treating 17 highest-priority sites during a biennium. And actually more than 20 additional sites, so far, have been treated with the one-time funding, demonstrating the capacity of the individual land managers and ecologists in the program to do great work if given enough resources. He observed that the ability to quickly add those new sites to the treatment workplan demonstrates the backlog of need in the program.

Legacy NAP Proposals

- Joe Rocchio presented a list of sites that in the past were considered, or recommended, for natural area designation by the Natural Heritage Advisory Council. He said the files for these sites vary in terms of the historical details about the council's deliberations and the reasons projects may not have been pursued. He will continue to add to this search by contacting prior Natural Heritage Program staff who may recall more detail.
- Heather Kapust inquired about information on potential natural area expansions, such as adding the adjacent state trust lands at Marcellus NAP. Rocchio noted that an expansion of Marcellus has been discussed at the staff level, and said this is a good example of a site that is expected to be highlighted with the development of essential conservation areas (ECAs) and additional analysis through environmental integrity assessments.
- Peter Dunwiddie raised the question of the need for reassessment of existing sites, given climate change and several other considerations. He said the boundaries at site establishment for some preserves may have been good at that time but new perspectives and opportunities that may come from ECA analysis may create a significant body of

work for re-visiting site designs. Rocchio agreed that the program will likely see additional conservation opportunities around established sites.

- Regarding the list of reviewed but not completed natural area preserve proposals, while researching these sites Rocchio checked aerial photography and found that some of these sites had been developed (lost) or otherwise degraded in the intervening years and no longer are viable as a natural area. Others would need a full inventory and ecological analysis to determine viability.
- Dunwiddie stated his expectation that the council's work is to generate new natural area preserves and he said we seem to have longer time periods between site recommendations. He said it would seem that with new sites as the primary work, he's not seeing a good job of implementing that. He noted the extensive time and effort put into site proposals and said he was troubled that the work doesn't generate success. He said it's hard to demonstrate a record of success for the investment.
- Kapust agreed that new sites are the goal. She noted that we could utilize the low-competition RCO grant funding in the conservation categories.
- Kathryn Kurtz wondered whether some funding in acquisition categories should be shifted to management activities, which is a need she has seen during her time on the council.
- Chair Diefenderfer observed that council members visit sites and notice conservation opportunities; Is there something that council members can do to move some of the older recommendations forward?
- Janet Gorrell said that the sites that make it to the council for consideration are recommended for establishment, and the part that is ill defined is the capacity of the agencies and region staff to prioritize conservation to implement the recommendations.
- Dunwiddie agreed, noting recent loss of institutional knowledge, and capacity, with retirements.
- Rocchio agreed adding that the "easy part" of creating new preserves is identification of natural heritage features. He said the staff time available for work to designate the natural areas, either due to grant-leveraged Natural Heritage Program staff time or the loss of staff at federal partner agencies, is part of the barrier to site creation. He suggested that if funded, prioritized, and staffed, then site creation is what could be delivered. Rocchio also noted that reasons for the lack of new sites is varied, and lack of capacity for developing new NAP recommendations is only one of many reasons why many sites don't make it all the way through the designation process.
- Claudine Reynolds asked about the status of Natural Heritage and Natural Areas since the reductions years ago. Staff replied that Natural Heritage is now six instead of 12, and Natural Areas is now 12 instead of 17 (noting that these figures are a state budgeting "Full Time Equivalent" estimate). Both programs are on track for a slight increase in staffing with the newly approved funding. However, due to the restrictions on how the new funding can be used, the staff increases for Natural Heritage do not replace some of the key positions lost in the Great Recession reductions, including an environmental review coordinator and a zoologist.
- The council discussed the phases and steps of creating a new natural area. Following the discussion, Chair Diefenderfer observed that the conversation points to a lack of shared knowledge on the council, likely because the departments and council aren't doing the

work. She said this work is urgent, and wondered about dividing up tasks so that individual council members might help with specific sites they are knowledgeable about.

- Gorrell said agency region offices sometimes don't raise conservation to a priority and so that slows site creation. She offered that a process that sets clear expectations for the agencies represented on the council may help assess later where and why a designation process stopped. Rocchio added that site complexity often plays into how challenging a recommendation is to implement, with Wanapum proposed-NAP, which is next on the agenda, being a good example.
- Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn noted that department staff work to support the science as a basis for council discussions, which frames the work of the council, and the conservation deliverables. She said what follows after the council's recommendations doesn't reflect on the council's effectiveness.
- Ian Sinks hopes to continue the conversation in support of Natural Heritage work, referencing an earlier comment by Rocchio about the State of Washington being viewed nationally as a leader in how Natural Heritage data is used to inform land use decisions and natural area conservation. He hopes that work can be accomplished faster with new staff.
- Dunwiddie highlighted a need to help other agencies (such as State Parks or the federal Bureau of Land Management) move their sites forward to natural area preserve designation, or managed for the conservation features if the sites are already designated.
- Chair Diefenderfer noted that the original Natural Area Preserves Committee was tasked with identifying sites before the Natural Heritage Program was created, and this might be done currently drawing on the knowledge of members.
- Becky Brown shared an example of a land trust that was able to acquire a site quickly, and from reluctant landowners, without formal Natural Heritage designation but with her advice about the site's conservation value.
- Chair Diefenderfer suggested a next step in this discussion might be for the October council meeting to be focused on gathering site information from the council instead of the standard agenda, which might include a GIS desk review and information download.
- Janelle Downs also said it would be valuable to cross some of the older sites off the list if we have information that indicates they would not be viable.

Wanapum

- Janet Gorrell, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), reviewed the Wanapum proposed-natural area preserve; the council reviewed boundary, a map of the occurrence locations for the striped whipsnake, and a description of ownerships with the recommended boundary.
- She noted that while some of the lands within the proposed boundary are either owned or managed by WDFW on behalf of the Bureau of Reclamation, their local land manager reports that due to low program funding (about \$1 per acre within the WDFW Crab Creek Wildlife Area), staff serve only a custodial role that includes mending fences, picking up trash, etc.
- Gorrell shared maps of a proposed solar development project, and of a smaller Wanapum boundary concept drawn more tightly around the whipsnake occurrences by former Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark.

- Janelle Downs hoped the council would re-visit the smaller Goldmark boundary. Chair Diefenderfer supported that concept.
- Claudine Reynolds wondered if WDFW could work with landowners within the original boundary to implement an agreement protecting the whipsnake that is compatible with the development of the solar project.
- Rocchio suggested moving forward with the original boundary for outreach to the federal Bureau of Reclamation, which is a large landowner within the proposed boundary and is part of the solar project, to see if conservation is feasible as part of their development project. Curt Pavola observed that the original boundary recommendation from the Natural Heritage Advisory Council is still in play because neither the original recommendation nor the smaller notional design went forward for public review. The process stalled prior to the public outreach step in the site establishment process.
- Becky Brown asked about the status of the solar project, thinking that if it is far enough along that the conservation concern may be viewed as a political issue. The concept of mutual management of the whipsnake habitat may be more achievable.
- Action Steps: Janet Gorrell will check in with WDFW staff about the proposed solar development, and Joe Rocchio will check in with the WDFW herpetologist who discovered the site to check on whipsnake status.
- Chair Diefenderfer agreed that the original council recommendation is the design that should be discussed with stakeholders.

Review Field Trip Agenda

The Natural Heritage Advisory Council will conduct a field trip to two sites on June 22: Mima Mounds Natural Area Preserve in Thurston County and NHAC Council Member Maynard Mallonee's farm in Lewis County to view his prairie management regime in support of Kincaid's lupine and other rare plants.

Other Business / Comments from the Public

No members of the public were in attendance.

Adjourn

Chair Diefenderfer adjourned the meeting at 4:55 p.m.

MINUTES APPROVED: January 24, 2024