



Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

January 11, 2023 • 9:36 am – 12:24 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, Ian Sinks, Adam Cole (RCO, joined for last half-hour)

Councilmembers Absent: Heather Kapust (ECY), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn (DNR), Ian Sinks, Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

DNR Staff in Attendance: Tim Stapleton, Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, David Wilderman, Rebecca Dzieza, Bruce Schneider; Laurie Benson joined at 11:15 am

Visitors: none

Chair Heida Diefenderfer called the meeting to order at 9:36 a.m.

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

Council members reviewed a number of suggested edits and technical corrections to the draft October 19 minutes. Chair Diefenderfer asked that comments be address in a second draft for council review and action during the May 2023 council meeting.

Carry-Forward Topics from Previous Meeting

- Report from NHAC member visits to Natural Areas:
 - Peter Dunwiddie summarized his recent plant inventory work with others on Cypress Island, updating the site's plant list including new species. This adds to a larger inventory project within the San Juan Islands, in which about 175 islands have already been surveyed, and they are beginning to work with Canadian colleagues for the entire archipelago of San Juan and Gulf Islands. The hope to publish information this summer. David Wilderman added that the Northwest Lichenologists group conducted a 4-day field trip this fall on Cypress Island to inventory lichens.

- Update on Funding for Natural Heritage and Natural Areas Programs:

- Chair Diefenderfer requested an update on “essential conservation areas” (ECAs) mentioned during the prior meeting. Joe Rocchio said the Natural Heritage Program submitted a Habitat Strategic Initiative Lead grant proposal to develop ECAs within the Puget Sound basin, addressing data backlogs and supporting additional standard natural heritage work as part of ECA development. If combined with a new legislative funding proposal from DNR, the work would be extended statewide. Another opportunity would be Environmental Protection Agency Region 10 Wetland Program Development grants, which could fund ECA development for wetland-associated species and ecosystems across the state. All of these options would require hiring new staff to support the ECA work.

- Chair Diefenderfer requested an update on activities of the subcommittee working on outreach on behalf of the Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program budget requests. (The subcommittee consists of Diefenderfer, Kathryn Kurtz, and Ian Sinks, with Tim Stapleton attending in support). Kurtz noted that DNR’s new outdoor education and training manager, Clare Sobetski, is including Natural Heritage in her educational outreach. Kathryn also noted that a variety of funds support this work, including forest health and resiliency, urban forestry, and a new proposal from the governor that aims for \$51 million per year for outdoor learning. She notes that many of the new legislators she meets, as well as their constituents, are interested in getting kids outdoors for learning in natural settings. Tim Stapleton added his view that the work Sobetski is doing is broad and could encompass the conservation programs. Joe Rocchio said that Natural Heritage staff participate in educational activities as available, noting that audiences for their work tend to be more technical, discussing technical issues around the conservation status and viability/integrity of rare species and ecosystems. Natural Heritage staff aren’t trained educators and adjusting their current outreach for K-12 audiences would take significant effort on their part. Curt Pavola added for Natural Areas that while current staffing for environmental education is limited, with new funding and staff, the program could re-establish and enhance educational activities as part of the program’s legislative mandate.

- Chair Diefenderfer inquired about whether the subcommittee should continue; and should it pursue another meeting with the Commissioner of Public Lands? Stapleton offered that the subcommittee would be beneficial later in the spring for developing the concept of a supplemental budget enhancement focusing on education, if the current DNR budget proposal is approved and the programs receive new resources. However if the enhancement is not approved, then any supplemental request would likely focus again on core program work.

- Dunwiddie observed that the lack of funding has been driving the direction of the programs in recent years, determining which positions are retained or not. He asked to what extent a master plan guides decisions on what could or should be enhanced in the programs versus what is currently adequately supported. Is there a need for prioritization? Stapleton noted that DNR is in the process of reviewing program design and staffing for the Natural Areas Program, based on

recommendations in recent years from the Natural Areas program manager, Curt Pavola. Pavola reviewed the questions Dunwiddie posed in light of both the need for additional staff and the changing nature of conservation land management, such as the emerging focus on climate resiliency and forest restoration. The pending program review, for which Division Manager Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn is selecting a consultant, will highlight the strengths of current program design and help DNR meet future needs once additional resources are available, instead of simply building the program back by replacing the positions reduced during the Great Recession. What type of expertise is needed, and when and where? He said the council will be involved in this review. Chair Diefenderfer asked that this topic be added as a standing council agenda item.

- Rocchio noted that the use of additional funds might be different for the Natural Heritage Program. The program is supported with a lot of grant and contract work but lacks adequate core staff funding, with an example being the long-vacant zoologist position. Chair Diefenderfer expressed support for getting the “critical zoologist role” funded within Natural Heritage, understanding that this position focuses on very different work than the information provided in partnership with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Replying to an inquiry about the timing for filling the zoologist role, either now or after the ECAs are developed, Rocchio noted that the need is current and would fill data gaps for the ECA work and also address the data needed for the NatureServe network. Janelle Downs agreed that a zoologist focused on natural heritage elements would broaden the information available because much of the other work focuses on charismatic animal species. Downs and Diefenderfer discussed the lack of information for invertebrate species and the risk of loss due to stressors such as climate change. Downs noted that invertebrate data is the missing key piece of conservation data in the ecosystems conservation approach. Dunwiddie agreed with DNR’s direction of looking into program design to help guide the use of budget enhancements. He suggested a focus on initially meeting the most pressing current needs for the programs. Becky Brown supported this council discussion, adding “we don’t know what we don’t know” with the caution that many other species are under-represented in natural heritage data, such as fungi. Rocchio agreed while adding that we are protecting some species by protecting whole ecosystems (protecting species we aren’t aware of yet), and deciding what to focus scarce staff time on is a difficult decision.
- Kurtz points out the opportunity to address many of these program gaps if the DNR budget request was fully funded, which needs support to pass the Legislature. While she agrees with Stapleton’s suggestion to focus the subcommittee efforts on a supplemental request, she also sees a role for council members communicating with legislators, possibly testifying. Both Kurtz and Stapleton expressed the opinion that DNR’s operating budget request is receiving support. Chair Diefenderfer and member Brown discussed the role of council members in communicating to legislators, representing yourself and your expertise and also as one member of the council, not on behalf of the entire

council. Chair Diefenderfer will schedule a meeting of the subcommittee in February, and include Brown, Downs and Ian Sinks.

Washougal Oaks Kincaid Lupine Proposal

David Wilderman, statewide ecologist for the DNR Natural Areas Program, presented a proposal for plant introduction at Washougal Oaks Natural Area, within the conservation area of this combined natural area preserve and natural resources conservation area. DNR was approached by the Institute for Applied Ecology (IAE) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to participate in a multi-site introduction or re-introduction project for Kincaid's lupine (*Lupinus oreganus var. kincaidii*), a federally threatened plant species. Following consultation with the Natural Heritage Advisory Council, if DNR chooses to serve as one of the host sites, this would be one of the first "introduction" of a species at a DNR natural area because no record of the plant exists for this site, although the habitat is typical for the plant's known range. Other participant sites will serve as reintroductions or population enhancements. Only one plant re-introduction has occurred in the Natural Areas Program, Golden Paintbrush (*Castilleja levisecta*) at Mima Mounds Natural Area Preserve. For the Kincaid's lupine project, IAE would conduct the work in consultation with DNR, and the Natural Areas Program would assume long-term maintenance, such as controlling invasive species, mowing, and possibly prescribed fire.

Wilderman summarized the status of Kincaid's lupine: Occurs in upland prairies, oak savannas and open forests; occurs primarily in the Willamette Valley but ranges from southwest Oregon to Lewis County; Four populations on privately owned lands in Washington state, however none of which meet minimum criteria in the federal recovery plan (with the goal of at least two populations covering 1,000 square meters on land managed for conservation); the Washougal Oaks introduction site would be within the plan's Washington Southwest Recovery Zone. This project would restore 10 acres of pasture and disturbed area to savanna.

Janelle Downs posed questions about potential hybridization with other lupines present and the prior status of the pasture lands: were they oak savanna originally? Wilderman said the original General Land Office Survey maps indicate the area was savanna. Addressing concerns about impacts to other conservation features, Wilderman noted that future management actions would benefit the other species in the restored ecosystem.

Dunwiddie noted other species of lupine within a couple miles of the project site, such as on Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge, and Wilderman said he would inquire further about the potential for hybridization with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, noting that the recovery plan does call this out as a concern. Dunwiddie said the Service should directly address this topic and survey the area. He's supportive of the project, saying this might also be considered for preserves now or in the future.

Chair Diefenderfer raised the concern that projects such as this be a future drain on limited resources, and wondered if a fund would be available to help with management costs. Wilderman said that while no dedicated future funding is available, this site and project would be a high priority for grant funding in light of the federal recovery plan. Curt Pavola added that land management grants from the state Recreation and Conservation Office also have a mechanism

for DNR to request a small increase in the program's biennial operating budget once projects are completed.

Maynard Mallonee noted that the conservation efforts on his farm has increased his Kincaid's lupine population by 30 percent, plus it has benefitted other native plants. He uses animals to graze the plant habitat and then when the first camas blooms he moves the cattle off site. He works with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to gather seeds. He said the seeds for this proposed Washougal Oaks population would come from his farm in Boistfort Prairie near Curtis, Washington. He suggested the council consider using cattle as method to control invasive species instead of burning and clearing, which have heavy fossil fuel impacts. Wilderman said he is familiar with the Boistfort site and the grazing program, noting that grazing has been done experimentally at another site as well. He said this type of management would have to be reviewed very carefully, adding that the program has only used them temporarily to continue existing grazing at a site, not to bring animals into a site for management. Chair Diefenderfer offered that natural area preserve designation would also affect the restrictions around grazing.

Mallonee offered to host the council at the farm for a presentation of his methods. He has used private funds for his work but would be interested in any funding available from agencies, and for permanent conservation as well.

Dunwiddie noted he was part of the original discussion of conservation at Boistfort Prairie. He suggested that ecologists and land managers should be willing to think outside the box and consider the many examples where land management alternatives can be helpful. Burning, mowing, grazing; they all approach conservation management in different ways but are not necessarily compatible. He urged a focus on the conservation target and the most effective means to control the invasive plants being managed. He referenced Dr. Sarah Hamman's extensive grazing program for private landowners in the South Sound.

Claudine Reynolds said grazing has been effectively used to reduce vegetation in support of recovery of the Oregon spotted frog in Thurston County, with partners including the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Downs acknowledged some benefits to using animals for control but noted other considerations such as fencing and water. Mallonee said his farm pays for those items.

Chair Diefenderfer expressed interest in visiting Mallonee's farm, and suggested that the council should wait until the May meeting to schedule this year's field trip that is part of the June meeting. Mallonee suggested a May trip for interested council members would be appropriate timing.

Wilderman noted that the Washougal Oaks project funding decision is likely in mid spring, with a follow-on final decision regarding DNR participation by fall 2023 or early 2024.

Agency Decision Packages and Next Steps

Tim Stapleton reviewed a DNR-requested capital project that the state Office of Financial Management (OFM) chose not to fund, called "Natural Areas Completion and Easements." This new capital budget allocation would have provided an opportunity fund that DNR could use for

emerging capital expenditure needs, such as purchasing easements for public access or buying small inholdings within natural areas boundaries from private sellers. OFM said this use of funds did not meet the state’s guidelines for capital budgets. Stapleton reported that the other Natural Areas proposals, both operating budget and capital budget, are moving forward with broad support. Curt Pavola briefly reviewed the Natural Areas Program budget requests, as highlighted in the program report to the council.

Agency Oral Reports

Adam Cole of the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) reported that capital budget discussions are beginning now at the Legislature, with the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program and RCO in general receiving broad support both with the public and legislators. He noted that the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board is expected to approve the new Statewide Recreation and Conservation Plan during their next meeting. The 5-year plan includes priorities guiding RCO’s programs.

Chair Diefenderfer gave an update on a study commissioned by the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and conducted by the Washington State Academy of Sciences to define “net ecological gain.” The report recommended use of the Natural Heritage Program’s Ecological Integrity Assessment methodology as a means of measuring ecological gain. She was a member of the scientific study team that helped WDFW develop the concept. WDFW later hired a contractor to analyze the scientific report and write a summary for the Legislature, and unfortunately, the draft summary did not adequately capture the thinking and work of the original committee. The original report is, however, included as an appendix in the summary report. The Committee on Net Ecological Gain has requested a number of changes to the summary report to the Legislature.

Other Business / Comments from the Public

No members of the public were on the call.

Adjourn

Chair Diefenderfer concluded the video conference call at approximately 12:24 pm.

MINUTES APPROVED: June 21, 2023