

Meeting Minutes Natural Heritage Advisory Council

October 19, 2017

Minutes Approved: January 25, 2018

WET Science Center
500 Adams Street NE
Olympia, Washington 98501

Council members present: Peter Dunwiddie (chair), Heida Diefenderfer, Norm Schaaf, Cheryl Schultz, Kathryn Kurtz, Ian Sinks, Amanda Reed, Sarah Gage (RCO) and Wendy Connally (WDFW). Participating by phone: Becky Brown, Janelle Downs, and Rob Fimbel (State Parks).

Staff present: John Gamon, Curt Pavola, Andrea Thorpe, Mark Reed, Rebecca Niggemann, Joe Rocchio, Walter Fertig, and Ben Guss.

Others: None

1. **Welcome and Introductions:** Dunwiddie called the meeting to order at 9:35 AM. Council members and staff introduced themselves. Staff of the WET Science Center gave a brief overview of the facilities along with logistics and safety information.
2. **Review and approval of March 2017 and June 15 meeting minutes:** Minutes for the March 24, 2017 and June 15, 2017 meetings of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council were unanimously approved as presented (motion by Schaaf, second by Diefenderfer).
3. **Acquisitions Report - Progress on past recommendations:** Mark Reed reported on conservation acquisitions activity since the last meeting of the Natural Heritage Advisory Council (June 15, 2017). During this reporting period, the Department closed on 2 acquisitions totaling 85.61 acres. Within Kennedy Creek NRCA, 5.18 acres were acquired in fee using \$80,000 of Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) funding. Within Mt. Si NRCA, a conservation easement covering 80.43 acres was acquired for \$300,000 using monies from USFWS Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (Section 6). A copy of Reed's report is attached.

There was discussion of the funding sources for these projects, how projects get prioritized for funding requests, whether or not there is coordination with land trusts, and how decisions are made regarding whether to pursue fee title acquisition or conservation easements. Chair Dunwiddie suggested that the grant programs (particularly USFWS Section 6) and how DNR utilizes them should be a topic for a future NHAC meeting. He suggested covering the grant application process and actions taken, including any subsequent monitoring.

Sinks asked whether Ecological Integrity Assessments (EIAs) are undertaken as part of the analysis process at new sites when a boundary is established. Gamon responded that NAPs get a thorough ecological assessment, although entire sites are not necessarily evaluated using EIAs. Rocchio clarified that the EIA lens may be used for element occurrences of ecosystems in NAPs, but not for

the entire area within a proposed boundary. NRCAs may, or may not, come to the NHAC and as a result, the level of Natural Heritage staff analysis varies. In the case of Kennedy Creek NRCA, no EIA work was conducted.

4. **Commissioner Hilary Franz:** Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz addressed the Council and answered questions. She acknowledged the many pressures on our landscapes, such as population growth and climate change, which put resources at risk. She also noted that many kids do not have opportunities that connect them to nature. She emphasized that we need to do more to connect young people to landscapes, because if we do not, "...everything we do today will be for naught, because they are the decision makers of the future."

With regard to the Natural Heritage Plan, Commissioner Franz encouraged council and staff to think about changes that have occurred since the last edition, and adjust the plan accordingly. She also encouraged us to think about showcasing our special places and to create stories that will live on.

Commissioner Franz and council members discussed the concept of resiliency as it relates to ecosystems, landscapes and healthy communities. She likened resiliency to "military ruggedness," being able to withstand whatever comes your way.

Council member Diefenderfer asked the Commissioner what role the Natural Heritage Advisory Council can play in achieving her priorities as Commissioner. She encouraged council members to help describe what our programs do and why, and to identify opportunities that have been missed. She challenged council members to help raise the profile of the programs by highlighting the importance of the work being undertaken.

At 10:19 am, staff at the WET Center announced the Great Shake Out (a statewide earthquake preparedness exercise). The Council, staff, and the Commissioner all participated.

5. **Natural Heritage Plan Update:** Gamon provided an overview of the process to complete an update or revision to the *State of Washington Natural Heritage Plan* and the timeline for doing so. In order for DNR to be eligible for the 2018 WWRP grant round, we need to have a completed and adopted plan. To achieve that, we need to have NHAC approval in January 2018 with Commissioner of Public Lands approval soon thereafter so that the plan can be provided to the natural resources committees of the Legislature prior to the close of the 2018 legislative session (scheduled for late February 2018). Gamon also noted that staff will be asking for approval of the lists of priority species and ecosystems as presented today.

Thorpe presented the draft document (which had been provided to council members prior to the meeting) and led the discussion that followed. Key issues and questions raised by council members included:

- Who is the primary audience?
- Overall readability
- Is the document intended for broad use, or solely by DNR?
- Uncertainty regarding whether it is meant to be a vision statement, a strategic plan or some other type of document

- There should be some stated connection to DNR’s agency-wide priorities
- Need more information providing rationale for changes in priority for species and ecosystems
- Need clarification regarding how land trusts and other conservation organizations can help contribute to the goals or vision of the NH Plan
- Day-to-day work of NH and NA programs should be better described and featured.

The bottom line guidance provided by the Council was that staff should continue to craft a document that will be most useful to the Natural Heritage and Natural Areas programs and that we should clearly state what needs the document is meant to fulfill. There was also discussion of the potential to develop a separate document that would be more like a traditional strategic plan for the two programs. Council members expressed a willingness to assist with such an effort.

6. **Preview of Potential New Natural Area:** Thorpe gave a short presentation about a potential new natural area adjacent to Steptoe Butte State Park. The current owners are conservation-minded, but are apparently interested in selling it to an entity that can manage it long-term for conservation purposes. The area has several rare plant species, including *Silene spaldingii* (listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act), as well as some of the best remaining Palouse grasslands. The property in question also has an old orchard that was featured in a New York Times article about heirloom apple varieties.

The discussion covered a range of options for ownership and management of the property, if it is determined to warrant designation as a natural area. Additional discussion between DNR, State Parks, local land trusts, and the owners will need to occur. DNR staff will organize a field trip for interested council members to the site prior to bringing a proposal to the council.

7. **Agency Reports:** State Parks, Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Recreation and Conservation Office, and the Department of Natural Resources each provided a summary report.

DNR: Gamon reported that the Legislature did not pass a capital budget prior to adjourning last session. This creates a challenge for the Natural Areas Program because some staff positions, mostly in the regions, are partially supported by capital funding, some of which comes directly to DNR and some comes via grants administered by RCO. The program is expected to have a shortfall of approximately \$200,000 without the capital funds. Gamon also noted that there have been several changes to the WWRP grant programs; these changes are summarized in the attached RCO report submitted by Sarah Gage.

WDFW: Connelly reported that she is relatively new in her position and new as WDFW’s appointee on the council. The lack of a capital budget presents significant challenges for WDFW as well, in terms of staffing and workload capacities. WDFW launched their Lands 2020 effort in July. There will likely be little acquisition activity in eastern Washington in the near term. WDFW is focusing on management of existing properties and partnerships on forests and farmlands in southwestern Washington.

State Parks: Fimbel reported that the lack of a capital budget has and will put a strain on the operating budget. The agency is requesting a supplemental budget of \$4 million for forest health and fuels reduction. Some of the work may occur within natural areas in state parks.

Recreation and Conservation Office: See attached report submitted by Gage.

8. **Natural Areas Report** – Pavola distributed a report (attached) for the Natural Areas Program, including information on the program’s budget, grants, grant requests, and updates from each DNR region on natural area projects within their respective regions.
9. **Natural Heritage Program**: Thorpe distributed a written report to the council (attached).
10. **2018 Meeting Dates**: Gamon will send Doodle polls to council members with options for meeting dates for calendar year 2018.

Chair Dunwiddie adjourned the meeting around 4:30 PM.