



Understanding the Need for a Marbled Murrelet Long-term Conservation Strategy



WHY AMEND THE HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN?

The Board of Natural Resources (BNR) is considering options to amend the 1997 State Trust Lands Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to include a long-term conservation strategy for the marbled murrelet. This HCP is an agreement with the federal government that permits DNR to conduct land management activities compliant with the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

In 1992 the marbled murrelet was listed as threatened under the ESA and in 1997 the marbled murrelet became one of the ESA species added to the HCP.

However, not enough was known about the marbled murrelet in 1997 to create a long-term strategy in the HCP, so an interim strategy was put in place. It was anticipated that the HCP would be amended with a long-term marbled murrelet strategy once enough information was known.

Since 1997, DNR has gathered information to create a long-term conservation strategy that uses the best available science, and will enable DNR and the US Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) to agree on a strategy that: 1) Fulfills environmental protection requirements under the Endangered Species Act, and 2) Also identifies areas of land held up in the interim strategy that can be released to DNR to harvest and manage for the benefit of public schools, counties, and other trust land beneficiaries.

IMPACTS ON TRUSTS AND COMMUNITIES

As a consequence of the HCP interim strategy, rural communities dependent on timber harvest have experienced serious loss of economic opportunities and revenues. DNR currently conserves approximately 43% of its land (583,000 acres) in murrelet territory because of other policies (such as conservation of other species in the 1997 HCP). During the development of the long-term conservation strategy, DNR has held aside an additional 170,000 acres that might eventually be chosen as part of the long-term strategy, which has caused further economic burden.

TIMELINE OF WORK

DNR has worked over the last 20 years to gather information on marbled murrelet behavior, working with the USFWS, scientists, and other experts around the country, as well as public meetings to find the best path forward.

1994-1997 A critical lack of scientific information was identified. Studies to identify habitat and the creation of a habitat model began.

1997 The State Lands HCP was adopted, which contained an interim marbled murrelet strategy that protected identified and modeled murrelet habitat.

1997-2009 Surveys to identify habitat continued. Over 15,000 surveys were conducted in this period.

2004-2008 A group of DNR, USFWS, and marbled murrelet experts formed the Science Team, which began work on the development of a proposed long-term conservation strategy.

2012 Public scoping meetings were held to identify the need, purpose, and objectives of a long-term strategy.

2013 A second round of public scoping meetings were held to discuss a range of possible long-term strategy alternatives to be analyzed in an environmental impact statement.

2015 A range of alternatives to be analyzed within the first official round of environmental review was adopted.

2015 DNR and USFWS adopted a framework that could be used to estimate the amount of impact and mitigation a conservation strategy would provide.

2015 A population viability analysis (PVA) was conducted by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison that evaluated the population effects of the conservation options being analyzed.

2016 DNR and USFWS published a draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) analyzing the potential environmental impacts of six unique conservation strategy alternatives, including the alternative proposed by the science team.

2017 Lessons learned from the environmental analysis and feedback from the public was presented to the Board of Natural Resources. This information was used to develop a single, preferred alternative to receive additional analysis.



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BEST INTEREST OF THE TRUSTS

DNR manages state lands on behalf of trust beneficiaries, including schools, counties, and other public institutions. As a trust lands manager, DNR must follow the common law duties of a trustee. These duties, which have been tested in the Washington Supreme Court, require DNR to provide a perpetual source of revenue to its trust beneficiaries through activities such as timber management.

This trust mandate also requires that DNR always act in the best interest of the trusts, which includes the decision to amend the HCP.

DNR's voluntary entry into the 1997 HCP provided crucial certainty for compliance with ESA, allowing DNR to continue conducting active forest management into the near-term future. But because a long-term conservation strategy for the marbled murrelet was not completed, long-term certainty for lands managed within the range of the murrelet was never achieved.

Amending the HCP with a long-term conservation strategy for the marbled murrelet will provide DNR's trust beneficiaries with the same level of certainty as they have had for other species under the HCP, far into the future.

Even so, not every trust will be affected equally. Due to the location of DNR trust land and the geographic needs of the marbled murrelet, some trusts are more affected than others. Ultimately, under DNR's legal responsibility as a trust manager of these lands, the BNR must select an alternative that is in the best interest of each of the individual trusts.

DNR's long-term marbled murrelet strategy must minimize financial impacts to rural communities and trust beneficiaries, while ensuring the environmental protections needed to comply with the ESA. The strategy must create stability for rural county revenue streams as well as habitat for the marbled murrelet.

STRATEGIC CONSERVATION

DNR has worked with USFWS to identify current and future habitat within the range of the marbled murrelet (red line). Strategically important areas for conservation are identified below. These areas represent places where DNR conservation can provide the greatest benefit to the marbled murrelet. These areas include high nesting potential, close proximity to abundant marine populations, and/or the only potential forested habitat in the area. Whatever course is selected, it must emphasize the importance of the quality of the habitat available to the murrelet.

DNR's conservation efforts will focus on the state lands within these areas (shown in orange). A long-term conservation strategy will eventually identify areas of conservation where active timber management will be discontinued, as well as specify which areas are suited for future timber management to the benefit of DNR's trust beneficiaries.

