



Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

May 4, 2023 • 10:03 a.m. – 2:53 p.m.
Remote Web-based Meeting

Councilmembers in Attendance (all via conference call): Heida Diefenderfer (Chair), Becky Brown, Janelle Downs, Peter Dunwiddie, Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Kathryn Kurtz, Maynard Mallonee, Claudine Reynolds, Ian Sinks, Adam Cole (RCO), Heather Kapust (ECY), Nate Johnson (for Andrea Thorpe at State Parks)

Councilmembers Absent: Kristen Ohlson-Kiehn (DNR)

DNR Staff in Attendance: Tim Stapleton, Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Mark Reed, David Wilderman, Rebecca Dzieza, Tynan Ramm-Granberg, Irene Weber

Visitors: none

Chair Heida Diefenderfer called the meeting to order at 10:30 a.m. Ian Sinks noted that councilmembers previously had a spot on the agenda for report-outs, and the council approved this additional item for the agenda.

Approval of the Minutes for the October 19, 2022, and January 11, 2023, Council Meetings

Council members reviewed a revised version of the October 19, 2022, meeting minutes and Peter Dunwiddie moved, Ian Sinks seconded, and the council approved the minutes as presented. Chair Diefenderfer deferred action on the January 11, 2023, meeting minutes to the June council meeting.

- Legislative Update
 - Tim Stapleton reviewed several legislative topics, including the “legacy forest” discussion among DNR and various constituent groups, the Legislature’s direction for DNR to acquire 2,000 acres (or up to \$70 million) to purchase westside carbon sequestration forested lands with a focus on both good conservation and carbon sequestration. Stapleton noted the lands may not be conserved through the typical natural areas designation process. Council members and DNR staff discussed how such acquisition may or may not relate to natural heritage priorities, and Stapleton noted that the budget proviso language was developed late in the session and DNR is still considering how to approach this opportunity, however a potential

exists for good conservation if we engage on this topic with the trust land managers.

- Chair Diefenderfer asked whether the 2,000 acres will be selected before essential conservation areas (ECAs) are completed, and Joe Rocchio confirmed that the list needs to be developed this year, however long-term the ECAs will help guide such conservation efforts. Rocchio also noted that he will advocate for using Natural Heritage Plan priorities for any suggested natural area preserves. Stapleton confirmed that DNR's conservation staff will control the designation of NAPs.
 - Peter Dunwiddie noted that fast-moving amendments may have been reviewed in the past when conservation organizations had lobbyists who worked with DNR. Curt Pavola noted that the draft floor amendment was shared with DNR just prior to inclusion in the legislation, while final drafting was done by the Legislature.
 - Rocchio reported on about \$400,000 coming to the Natural Heritage Program for development of ECAs in the Puget Sound Basin, and he is considering hiring a new ecologist, or two, for this work.
 - Pavola noted that the list of funded land acquisition grants for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program included all of DNR's applications with the exception of Lacamas Prairie Natural Area. Ian Sinks asked if DNR knew why that grant was removed from the funding list, and Stapleton replied that we are still looking into that.
- Council Appointments
 - Stapleton said he will finalize appointment letters and move up the chain for signature. The two nominations are: Ailene Ettinger of The Nature Conservancy of Washington and John Bishop of WSU-Vancouver.
 - Peter Dunwiddie noted the lag time in contacting interest individuals and asks for the process to move more quickly in the future. Chair Diefenderfer agrees that the candidates should receive an update and confirmation soon.
- Planning for Council Field Trip
 - Chair Diefenderfer offered that the council might wish to visit the Washougal Oaks restoration site mentioned in the previous meeting, or council member Maynard Mallonee's farm to see the Kincaid's lupin seed source for the restoration projects.
 - Nate Johnson noted Andrea Thorpe's interest in having the council visit the preserve at Ginko State Park, however Janelle Downs suggested that June is too late to see the conservation features of the site.
 - Dunwiddie offered other options for consideration: Mima Mounds NAP or Oak Patch NAP. Rocchio suggested Bald Hill NAP may be closer, while David Wilderman noted that Bald Hill would be an all-day hike. Chair Diefenderfer suggested that half-day sites might allow the council to see two. Johnson added that Lewis & Clark State Park isn't a natural area preserve but it has a remnant plant community and the Cowlitz Tribe are still harvesting camas; however June would not be peak bloom for camas.

- Claudine Reynolds inquired about Tahoma Forest Natural Resources Conservation Area. Wilderman observed that it is a fairly small, remote site and was transferred largely for spotted owl habitat; also a long drive with tricky steep access.
 - Mallonee invites the council to visit his farm in the Boistfort area, and Chair Diefenderfer asks staff to put a draft tour together that includes the farm and one other nearby site.
- Acquisition Updates
 - Mark Reed reported on the acquisition of 6 properties totaling 706 acres at a value of \$2.6 million.
 - Sites included: Kennedy Creek Natural Area, Lamas Prairie Natural Area, Mima Mounds NAP, Washougal Oaks Natural Area, Upper Dry Gulch NAP, and Mount Si NRCA.
 - Chair Diefenderfer stated appreciation for the work and the report, suggesting more information about the site boundaries be included in the future. Dunwiddie added that new members may benefit from information about the long timeline for some of these sites and the importance of infilling within site boundaries.
- Council Member Reports and State Agency Reports
 - Ian Sinks reported that Columbia Land Trust has been working at Willapa Divide NAP to connect the DNR lands to the protected watershed in the Elochaman by buying trust lands.
 - In the Klicitat Canyon region the land trust is working to reintroduce fire to the conservation lands.
 - Nate Johnson reported on mixed outcomes from the legislative session, with funded “state lands restoration” grants in the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, but other projects not funded. He noted partial success in being funded with Natural Heritage for the assessment of recreation impacts on public lands.
 - Heather Kapust noted that the Department of Ecology had a successful session. All of their request bills passed. They received funding for draught response, and to update the statewide climate strategy, which is a 10-year old plan. The Walla Walla water planning legislation passed and in general they saw increases in both capital and operating budgets. For National Coastal Wetlands, Ecology was awarded 6 new projects, and they are now working on new applications currently.
 - Janet Gorrell also stated WDFW feels good about outcome of session, with support for the standard items they requested. They received about \$4 million to help build climate-resilient WDFW including species monitoring to guide future management action. Their biggest new funding is for \$8 million in the first year of the biennium and \$15 million the second year to plan for and manage species of greatest conservation need, with \$30 million per biennium to continue. Part of the funding is pass-through to partners, while other funds shore up staffing for a variety of species and habitats. Also, the next update for the State Wildlife Action Plan will be including plants. Gorrell is talking with Rocchio about that, and some of the federal funds at WDFW could come to DNR Natural Heritage Program once plants are included in the plan.

- Adam Cole said RCO similarly had great legislative outcomes. The Legislature appropriated more funds in some WWRP categories than had projects, and Natural Areas is one of them, so if Lacamas Prairie can we worked on in the next session there are reserved funds available. Also, RCO is hiring a tribal liaison, joining other agencies that have tribal relationships. Chair Diefenderfer posited that more projects could be proposed in the future if funding stays at current levels.
- Status Update for Older Designated Natural Area Preserves
 - Prior to the presentation, Tim Stapleton responded to a council question about the status of the recommendation for Marsh Creek proposed-NAP. He noted that the council-reviewed proposal was vetted with DNR region staff and a decision was made to bring it for decision to the executive management team. This is one example of a site needing a higher-management level discussion about where the decision-making lies for deciding a direction to take with multiple legislative missions and mandates. This site may be a good match for DNR's new legacy forest funding. At the staff level, Stapleton wants to reflect the council's recommendation in internal discussions and share back to the council how decisions are made, including considerations by the trust land managers and DNR executive management. Chair Diefenderfer noted that this more formal process would replace the informal discussions that have so far taken several years.
 - Stapleton added that this site may benefit from the newly revitalized Trust Land Transfer Program. This process can help clarify issues and lead to more efficient decision-making, which may be a model for future similar sites. Diefenderfer noted that Marsh Creek may be a place where the features are at risk, and urged that the process move ahead soon. Joe Rocchio added that the development of essential conservation areas likely will offer an opportunity to re-visit all such sites to determine the status of conservation features and urgency rank for protection.
 - Joe Rocchio presented an overview of the status of prior natural area preserves designations by several governmental agencies and non-governmental conservation organizations. He highlighted the historical foundations and documentation of the designated preserves, which are counted as conserved sites in the Natural Heritage Plan, thereby affecting current conservation priorities in the plan. He offered several thoughts for council discussion:
 - Conversations with NGOs regarding deeds on the preserves they manage – are those deeds enough for the site to continue meeting NAP criteria?
 - Establishing a cooperative agreement with each NGO regarding management of those sites
 - Supporting WDFW in revisiting the agency's NAP policy.
 - Janet Gorrell noted that a number of things that have taken the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife away from the traditional management of their natural areas, including staff turnover, a new data system for land tracking and others. Questions include both the original management for preserves and also the management needs of sites as they've grown. WDFW's mission is for wildlife management and recreational access, with limited restrictions on public access.

Gorrell noted the need for an internal conversation about preserves at WDFW and will begin those discussions.

- For non-governmental organizations, Ian Sinks expressed his belief that the deeds for properties will not be detailed enough to specifically meet the needs for the Natural Heritage Plan, so a cooperative agreement will likely be needed to assure protection and management. He noted that those organizations may wish to bring new proposals to the council for preserves, so looking back will help inform them going forward as well.
 - Janelle Downs urged DNR staff to keep the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sites – Research Natural Areas (RNAs) – in mind as well.
 - Peter Dunwiddie observes that there is no point of having these preserve programs unless the sites are accomplishing what they are intended too. Same with the Natural Heritage Registry sites. The challenge will be to develop cooperative agreements that spell out the commitments of both parties. Also, these tasks need to “sit on someone’s desk” to assure that someone is responsible for this work.
 - Diefenderfer added that an intentional system to assure attention is paid, such as a column in the updated WDFW database, can keep these sites in front of people.
 - Rocchio noted that the Registry is something that doesn’t have staffing because other work is higher priority. Dunwiddie offered that for the Registry to have value then perhaps alternatives to its management, or creation of a new mechanism by another organization, will help it achieve its purpose.
- Population Growth Impacts
 - Chair Diefenderfer said that previous discussions of site management plan priorities caused her to think about the need for new natural area designations in light of the impacts from population growth. She’s been observing local processes supporting annexation, zoning, and development, with the general trend toward growth of the development footprint.
 - Joe Rocchio also has been considering the current and future use of Natural Heritage Program data to help inform land use decisions. Development of essential conservation areas (ECAs) in particular will take site threats into account.
 - Diefenderfer posited a question: Do we need to be prioritizing specific areas of the state where opportunities for conservation are being rapidly foreclosed due to population growth and development? Rocchio said these impacts will be highlighted in ECA protection and urgency ratings along with relative imperilment of conservation elements.
 - Claudine Reynolds agreed with the observation of rapid development throughout the region and noted a general lack of understanding about how to develop with conservation also in mind, such as homeowners not mowing down to a stream and instead retaining habitat. She said she would like to see more sharing of information and resources to do better.
 - Diefenderfer noted the similarity of this concept to Jerry Franklin’s recent seminar in which he said it isn’t sufficient to have only conservation preserves, instead needing actions by all of us.

- Rocchio noted a recent visit he made to a preserve within an industrial area in the State of Indiana, showing that with effort urban sites can remain in remarkably good condition.
 - David Wilderman noted that DNR natural areas are designed with an attempt to include adequate buffer areas to protect the primary conservation feature. Over time we reassess past site designations to improve sustainability, such as the recent example of the boundary expansion at Skookum Inlet NAP.
 - Janet Gorrell noted that WDFW does try to affect change in the developing world through planning, both their land use conservation and policy priorities and their priority habitats and species program. She offered to join any future discussion on this topic.
- Management Planning Prioritization
 - Tim Stapleton gave an overview of Natural Areas Program staffing and recent review of priorities for management planning throughout the state. With new resources the program will hire planning staff, and also looking at region challenges for planning and site management is a concern, such as eastside program staff living six hours from the sites they are managing. Additional staffing will help achieve our planning goals. The focus initially could be sites with fairly easy management plans, which can help train new staff, combined with top priorities for more detailed plans. He will be looking at creating a plan priority matrix.
 - Curt Pavola described the small number of DNR natural areas with completed management plans, noting that many of the other natural area preserves have an old template-style plan that really is a simple statement of what is protected and basic site care; not very detailed or useful. However a large portion of preserves and conservation areas have no plan, although all preserves are managed to meet the goals of the Natural Heritage Plan and conservation areas are managed under the framework of the programmatic NRCA Statewide Management Plan.
 - Stapleton shared his vision for a strategy of identifying needs, using new funds successfully for planning, and then making the follow-up step to build program staffing to achieve identified goals.
 - Ian Sinks agreed with programmatic planning, and then focusing on site plans that are strategic, detailed; and with prioritization of sites to address. He cited the example of Columbia Land Trust planning for sites with oak plant community types.
 - Diefenderfer asked whether grouping of sites could help achieve multiple plans. David Wilderman noted that for some natural areas the management goals have been fairly broad and then more intensive restoration plans later have been developed later. He added that for several sites without a formal plan, program staff have created more extensive restoration planning along the way, with Mima Mounds NAP being a good example of having detailed restoration planning instead of a detailed management plan.
 - Diefenderfer supported the comments about efficiencies from strategic planning combined with site-specific plans that would meet the statutory direction for management planning.

- Workforce-Education Subcommittee and DNR Concept Paper
 - Ian Sinks recalled the challenge that the Commissioner of Public Lands issued to the Natural Heritage Advisory Council, to create a “Big, Bold Idea” for the council and her to advance. Some of the limitations from program capacity issues have been addressed with the budget success. He sees an opportunity for utilizing natural areas as outdoor laboratories, and engaging more people in environmental education. The idea could include expanding program capacity through partnerships, workforce diversification, and education partnerships featuring earlier public education featuring conservation. Internships could accomplish both objectives, supplementing staffing and diversifying the workforce, all while increasing educational opportunities. He said the effort should tie into marginalized groups and underrepresented communities.
 - Tim Stapleton outlined two options: Bring a council subgroup together to help frame up a specific request for DNR action in next legislative session; or create key points to share up to DNR’s new outdoor education and training program manager, Clare Sobetski, integrate into DNR budget request she is working on. He also reminded the council that DNR included the analysis of forests at risk of conversion in the Natural Areas / Natural Heritage budget package and it was funded as well.
 - Stapleton suggested the next step would be for him to meet with council members Kurtz and Sinks to determine how best to move forward.
 - Diefenderfer inquired about natural areas that can offer opportunities to advance workforce and educational goals.
 - Stapleton observed that DNR region staff do conduct educational outreach as part of their jobs, so adding staff capacity dedicated to this work will be helpful to them. He offered that placing staff near natural areas with access may be important as a way to tie conservationism with environmental justice. Curt Pavola added that some sites are already primed for this sort of educational work due to parking and easier access while others would need more development, especially if a goal is to add parking that can fit school buses or vans and to improve pathways.
 - Joe Rocchio noted that the “natural areas network” is broader than DNR, and could include state, federal or conservation organization partners. Sinks agreed, sharing the example of a Columbia Land Trust project in the Portland area that sponsors work for young adults, but not necessarily on lands owned by the land trust.

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 2:53 p.m.

MINUTES APPROVED: June 21, 2023