



Meeting of the Washington State Natural Heritage Advisory Council

October 13, 2021 • 9:30 am – Noon
Remote Web-based Meeting

Councilmembers in Attendance (all via conference call): Peter Dunwiddie (Chair), Becky Brown, Janelle Downs, Heida Diefenderfer, Kathryn Kurtz, Claudine Reynolds, Cheryl Schultz, Randi Shaw, Ian Sinks, Adam Cole (RCO), Janet Gorrell (WDFW), Heather Kapust (ECY), Andrea Thorpe (State Parks)

Councilmembers Absent: Maynard Mallonee, Laurie Benson (DNR)

DNR Staff in Attendance: Tim Stapleton, Joe Rocchio, Curt Pavola, Tynan Ramm-Granberg

Visitors: None

Chair Peter Dunwiddie called the meeting to order at 9:32 a.m. The agenda was accepted without changes.

Approval of the Minutes for the June 9, 2021 Council Meeting

The minutes were moved by Kathryn Kurtz and seconded by Ian Sinks. The council approved the meeting minutes unanimously.

Carry-Forward Items from Previous Meetings

- Report from NHAC member visits to Natural Areas: Kathryn Kurtz reported recently being at Kennedy Creek and Woodard Bay. She said she's interested in hearing about any DNR plans for a trail in riparian area of Kennedy Creek. Becky Brown has a planned visit to Bunchgrass Meadows OR Metaline Falls, a federal research natural area, soon. Andrea Thorpe has been working at Ragged Ridge NAP, which is within Mount Spokane State Park, in preparation for a restoration project to repair all-terrain vehicle impacts. Ian Sinks visited Pierce Island in the Columbia River. The island, which is a natural area preserve, was formerly owned by The Nature Conservancy and is now owned by Columbia Land Trust, and it includes a rare plant, Columbia yellowcress (*Rorippa columbiae*). The council then discussed the natural area registry and status of listings for older sites that we not formally designated as a federal, state or private natural area. Chair Dunwiddie was at Ginkgo State Park NAP on a day that was a bit windy and bleak. Thorpe added that the best time to experience the site is likely May.

- Update on funding for Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program: Joe Rocchio noted that the Natural Heritage Program has received another EPA grant, which is a competitive process, and a USFWS Section 6 grant, which is a more routine distribution of funds for projects. Tim Stapleton added that the post-covid trajectory is positive and strong for both the Natural Heritage Program and Natural Areas Program. New funds in Natural Areas are shoring up the base funding for primary program staff, while the program continues to seek additional core funding and soft funds (grants and projects). Stapleton also reported on a DNR reorganization for the division, from “Conservation, Recreation and Transactions” to “Recreation and Conservation.” The trust land transactions staff are being aligned with other business functions, while the conservation transactions staff will stay in the division. A job bulletin for the manager of the new division will be posted next week. The goal is to focus more closely on both recreation and conservation in the division and the department. Stapleton described a new initiative by Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz, called informally the “1 by 1 by 1” initiative. If this high priority department legislation is funded Natural Heritage would play a key role in identifying conservation priorities for land acquisition by government and conservation organizations, with a goal of protecting 1 million acres in some form of conservation status. The details of the proposal are under development, as is a formal name for it, and will be available prior to the 2022 Legislative Session. Rocchio added his view of this DNR initiative as complementing the national 30 by 30 program to protect 30 percent of U.S. land and waters by 2030.

Progress on Past Recommendations

The council was provided a written report of land acquisitions featuring Dabob Bay Natural Area and Stavis Natural Resources Conservation Area.

Natural Heritage Plan Development Update

Joe Rocchio referenced the draft of the 2022 Natural Heritage Plan that was distributed prior to the meeting, highlighting the topics from the table of content. Staff are filling out some of the data and graphics, and the council subcommittee will review the plan in detail in November. Rocchio asked for council comments on the overall direction for the plan, noting it would be ready for council adoption at the January meeting.

Kathryn Kurtz asked how the plan will address environmental equity. Rocchio and Tim Stapleton discussed the department’s recent work on diversity, equity and inclusion and noted that the programs are in the midst of gaining knowledge about bias and how it shapes our work but are not yet to the point of translating gained knowledge into practical and achievable actions. Stapleton offered that he’s proud of the teamwork and wasn’t sure that outcomes are well-enough in focus for this plan. Kurtz added that policy makers are using a checklist for equity issues when judging proposals, and the plan will be reviewed through this lens.

Chair Dunwiddie noted the difference between the currently debated question of how conservation is applied to the lands versus the equity and inclusion conversation about how we individually interact. Because he hasn’t seen much progress generally on the issue of how conservation is applied, he agreed it may be difficult to incorporate into this plan.

Stapleton noted that the department is hiring a diversity, equity and inclusion manager, and offered to share the council’s interest in this topic and be sure the new manager understands our work. Rocchio added that a mention in this plan might be appropriate to indicate the current

work being done by the programs. Kurtz views selection of conservation lands as a process that is ongoing and thus part of program work aside from natural heritage methodology. Rocchio agreed, pointing to a designation used by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program where “sites of local interest” are highlighted, which is an opportunity for Washington to do something similar. Stapleton added that the “1x1x1” funding for identifying “essential conservation areas” could be used in part to bring this topic into focus.

Cheryl Schultz suggested including a mention of environmental equity in this plan in the near term goals section. Becky Brown stated that explicitly including outreach in the education and access section may be another location for it. Ian Sinks offered that “local” input should include tribes, who are often not represented when outreach is conducted.

The council broadly voiced support for including reference to environmental equity in the plan.

Heida Diefenderfer inquired about inclusion of prescribed fire in the plan and posed the question about whether changes are needed in the way prescribed fire is used for conservation. Staff replied that prescribed fire is a management action noted in the plan and recently, with new financial resources, the department is expanding the use of prescribed fire including consideration of future projects on natural areas. Rocchio said he would look into plan language that would reflect the department’s recent forest health and climate change resilience planning. Brown suggested integrating the forest health and climate change sections.

Rocchio stated the need to meet with Recreation and Conservation Office staff to see if and how others are using the plan adequately for their grant proposals. He feels grant applicants may benefit from clarity about projects proposed for formal natural area designation versus or other conservation options or paths.

Brown inquired about Pinecroft NAP interpretive trail development as an example of a site needing to be more inclusive and welcoming of the community. Curt Pavola mentioned recent communication with City of Spokane Valley, who would be a project partner, and that the department is hiring a land manager position for the Northeast Region office, affirming the project is moving forward.

Randi Shaw offered an observation about climate resilience, asking whether there would be any circumstance for taking a preserve out of Natural Heritage Plan because it can no longer protected for the features it was conserved. The current direction appears to be assessing and bringing management resources to bear, not letting a site go. Rocchio said this question was address by the department a few years ago with the external group of climate advisors (Jerry Franklin and others) and the direction was to monitor and study, and inform science and land management. Shaw expressed a potential to change designation rather than sever ownership. Rocchio noted that if we explicitly ensure we capture ecological variability within our natural areas (such as variability associated with the ecological template—geology, aspect, soils, geography, climate, etc.) then our natural areas system will at least provide places where ecosystems and species can adapt to climate change, whatever that will look like. Shaw said the plan might include a statement to this effect, that the biodiversity of Washington is changing in all kinds of ways but natural areas exist in part to allow for natural adaptation to these changing conditions.

Chair Dunwiddie said the topic raises questions about having the resources to manage all the lands we have, and if triage is ever a need, then do the high-quality sites still receive the level of management they need? Diefenderfer posed the question about what happens with sea level rise, if a site falls below our natural heritage criteria, and the features disappear. Rocchio noted these are challenging questions for land managers, sometimes with competing information, so monitoring is key.

Diefenderfer added that the overall lack of predictability during climate change means keeping the entire suite of sites is necessary because we don't know what will happen. Chair Dunwiddie offered another interpretation of the question being discussed, which is that if the ecological values are completely different from what the site was created to protect, then monitoring doesn't add to science or program's land management goals. Brown stated that continuing development pressure means alternative opportunities for similar sites may not be available, and thus managing what we have is the only course.

Kurtz will offer comments on how environmental education and the Pacific Education Institute is mentioned in the draft plan. She noted PEI is working with others in the department, such as urban forestry planting trees in the Spokane area. Broadened language for partner opportunities would be appropriate, and since it is a capacity issue, then funding for programs and partners is key.

Discussion of Council Chair

Chair Dunwiddie noted that Heida Diefenderfer has expressed interest in serving as council chair. The council discussed the duties of the chair. Cheryl Schultz nominated Diefenderfer, and Becky Brown seconded the motion. The council voted unanimously to seat Diefenderfer as chair.

Other Business / Comments from the Public

The council considered options for meeting dates in January, March, May/June, and October, with final proposals to be distributed in an online poll before finalization. The council discussed options for a summer field trip combined with a meeting, including Pincroft NAP, Marsh Creek proposed-NAP, or Toutle Ridge Fen. Andrea Thorpe offered side trips if timing is appropriate for both Ginkgo State Park NAP and Ragged Ridge NAP.

Chair Diefenderfer inquired whether any members of the public may be on the phone and would like to provide comment to the council. No one spoke.

Adjourn

Chair Diefenderfer concluded the video conference call at 11:40 am.

MINUTES APPROVED: January 19, 2022