Sustainable Harvest Calculation for Eastern Washington

Staff Report

To: Sustainable Harvest Calculation (SHC) Steering Committee

From: SHC Project Team

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Subject: Natural Areas

Proposed Action

The Sustainable Harvest Calculation (SHC) Steering Committee should determine how to address natural areas that have not yet been transferred out of trust status in the forest estate model to be used in the sustainable harvest calculation for eastern Washington.

Background

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Natural Areas Program is responsible for managing a statewide system of conservation lands. The program protects some of the highest quality examples of natural Washington including native flora, fauna, and ecosystems. In addition to contributing to region-wide biodiversity conservation, natural areas serve as baseline reference sites to guide the management and restoration of less pristine lands. Research, environmental education, and low-impact recreation activities also occur on these lands. Natural areas are composed of two types of conservations lands: Natural Area Preserves (NAPs) and Natural Resource Conservation Areas (NRCAs).

Natural Area Preserves (NAPs)

The Natural Area Preserves Act established, "a state system of natural area preserves and a means whereby the preservation of these aquatic and land areas can be accomplished" (RCW 79.70.010). NAPs protect the best remaining examples of many ecological communities including rare plant and animal habitat. In eastern Washington, habitat protected in preserves include outstanding examples of arid land shrub-steppe, grasslands, vernal ponds, oak woodlands, subalpine meadows and forest, ponderosa pine forests and rare plant habitats.

The DNR Natural Heritage Program identifies the highest quality, most ecologically important sites for protection as NAPs. Scientists identify and prioritize natural heritage features and record them in the program's statewide database. The primary objective for management of state-owned NAPs is the maintenance of the natural heritage features for which they were established. These areas were also intended, and are frequently used, for ecological research and environmental education.

Low-impact public uses can occur in buffer areas when compatible with the conservation objectives of the site.

Once an area worthy of NAP designation is identified, DNR scientists develop a proposed boundary that includes the site's primary features and any additional lands considered necessary to ensure long-term viability of the protected elements. NAP proposals are presented to the Natural Heritage Advisory Council, which is a citizen advisory committee charged with making recommendations for the establishment of NAPs. DNR-proposed NAPs receive public review before a site recommendation is forwarded to the Commissioner of Public Lands for final action.

Natural Resource Conservation Areas (NRCAs)

The Natural Resources Conservation Areas Act established NRCAs as a new land designation that would help protect lands that have significant conservation values. NRCAs protect outstanding examples of native ecosystems, habitat for endangered, threatened and sensitive plants and animals, and scenic landscapes. Environmental education and low-impact public use are appropriate on conservation areas where they do not impair the protected features. NRCAs include coastal and high elevation forests, alpine lakes, wetlands, scenic vistas, nesting birds of prey, rocky headlands and high-quality natural plant communities. They also protect geologic, cultural, historical, and archaeological sites.

The Natural Heritage Advisory Council may recommend NRCA or NAP/NRCA combination designations to the Commissioner of Public Lands. Areas also may be nominated for NRCA designation by other parties. Such areas are then evaluated by Natural Heritage Program or Natural Areas Program staff to determine if they are consistent with the statutory purpose and definition (RCW 79.71). NRCA boundary proposals receive public review and a hearing is held in the appropriate county to gather public input. A site recommendation is forwarded to the Commissioner of Public Lands for final action via a Commissioner's Order.

Approved Natural Areas

Once a prospective natural area is approved, work begins on transferring state trust lands within the proposed boundaries into NAP or NRCA status through the Trust Land Transfer process. The natural area is entered into the DNR's corporate database under trust codes (74, 75) to designate them from other trust lands. While the status of these lands may still be state trust lands, these lands are managed primarily for conservation values as opposed to primarily for timber production once they are approved. The length of time for the Trust Land Transfer process to be completed can vary. For instance, Dabob Bay was approved as a natural area, but was not transferred out of trust land status for four years. During those four years, trust land management activities did not occur within the boundaries of the natural area.

Natural area boundaries that have been approved but not yet transferred are not permanent. Boundaries can be altered or rescinded if new information is found or if it is later determined these lands would be more primarily valuable for the purpose of trust land management timber harvest.

While management activities including limited harvests can occur within the boundaries of NAPs and NRCAs, these activities are focused on the objectives of forest health and ecosystem

restoration. Because these lands have been transferred out of state trust land status, they are not managed for the objective of providing long-term income for the trust beneficiaries. For this reason, a sustainable harvest level is not calculated in natural areas and acres for these lands are not optimized for economic value in the SHC.

Analysis

For the purposes of the SHC in eastern Washington, natural areas can contribute to wildlife habitat goals (i.e. Canada lynx and northern spotted owl) but are considered permanently deferred from any type of harvest activity.

As of July 2024, eastern Washington NAPs total approximately 7,371 acres and NRCAs total approximately 24,690 acres. Collectively, all natural areas that have been transferred into natural area status total approximately 32,061 acres in eastern Washington. The acres of lands within approved natural area boundaries that have not yet been transferred out of trust land status are difficult and speculative to estimate because boundaries can change over time and lands are transferred routinely. However, an estimate using current (January 2025) agency spatial data suggests that approximately 3,552 acres of state trust lands are currently located within formally approved natural areas boundaries in eastern Washington, with most of those acres (3,483 acres) being located within the Common School trust.

Option 1: Defer all lands within approved natural area boundaries.

This option would defer all lands within approved natural area boundaries, including those that have not yet been transferred out of trust status, from harvest. Once natural area boundaries have been approved, these lands cease to be primarily valuable for the purpose of trust land timber harvest and become primarily valuable for conservation purposes. This option is in alignment with DNR current management practices of deferring natural area lands from trust land management activities immediately upon approval, regardless of land classification.

Option 2: Defer only natural areas that have been fully transferred out of trust status.

This option would defer only natural areas that have been fully transferred out of trust status from harvest. In other words, lands within approved natural area boundaries that have not been transferred out of trust status will be included in the SHC. This option is supported by the current land classification status; however, this option is not in alignment with current DNR management practices.

Recommendation

The Project Team recommends that the SHC Steering Committee follow Option 2, meaning all acreage within natural area boundaries that have been transferred out of trust land status will be excluded from the strategic harvest planning models for the SHC. Approved boundaries of natural areas that have not yet been transferred out of trust land status will be included in the strategic harvest planning models. Staff recommend that these lands be included in the calculation until

they are officially transferred out of trust land status because the approved boundaries are subject to changes and contingent on funding. Once these lands are transferred and replacement lands are attained, the next SHC will account for these official changes to the analysis area.

Review and Decision

Document was reviewed and/or edited by:

- Glynis Gordon – Project Manager, Environmental Planner – P&P
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Document was reviewed by the following members of the SHC Steering Committee

- Todd Welker – Deputy Supervisor for State Uplands
- Duane Emmons – Assistant Deputy Supervisor for State Uplands
- Cameron Crump – Forest Resources Division Manager
- Michael Kearney – Product Sales and Leasing Division Manager

The Steering Committee has approved the staff recommendation as a project decision as of September 11, 2025.