

Water & Ecology Update

By Toni Meacham, Attorney at Law

It's not every day that I get to write an article about the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). WDFW produced a 1095-page document titled Washington's State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). I can imagine that most people wonder why I would worry about a Wildlife Action Plan in a Water and Ecology article, however, WDFW has decided that water and agriculture need to be addressed in their action plan, so I have to address this piece.

With a document this long, it would be easy to miss many of the important pieces. A big thanks to Randy Good for making sure we all got to see the document and making sure that WCA has an opportunity to be part of the process. SWAP is considered to be a "comprehensive plan for conserving the state's fish and wildlife and the natural habitats on which they depend. It is part of a nationwide effort by all 50 states and 5 U.S. territories to develop conservation action plans and participate in the State and Tribal Wildlife Grants (SWG) Program. The purpose of the SWG Program is to support state actions that broadly benefit wildlife and habitats, but particularly "Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) (PDF)" as identified by each individual state."

The history of the plan is that Washington completed the first plan in 2005. US Fish and Wildlife require that the plan be updated every 10 years, so 2025 is the next big update with the target being October 2025.

WDFW does recognize that humans have a large impact on biodiversity and cause loss of habitat. With the Washington population projected

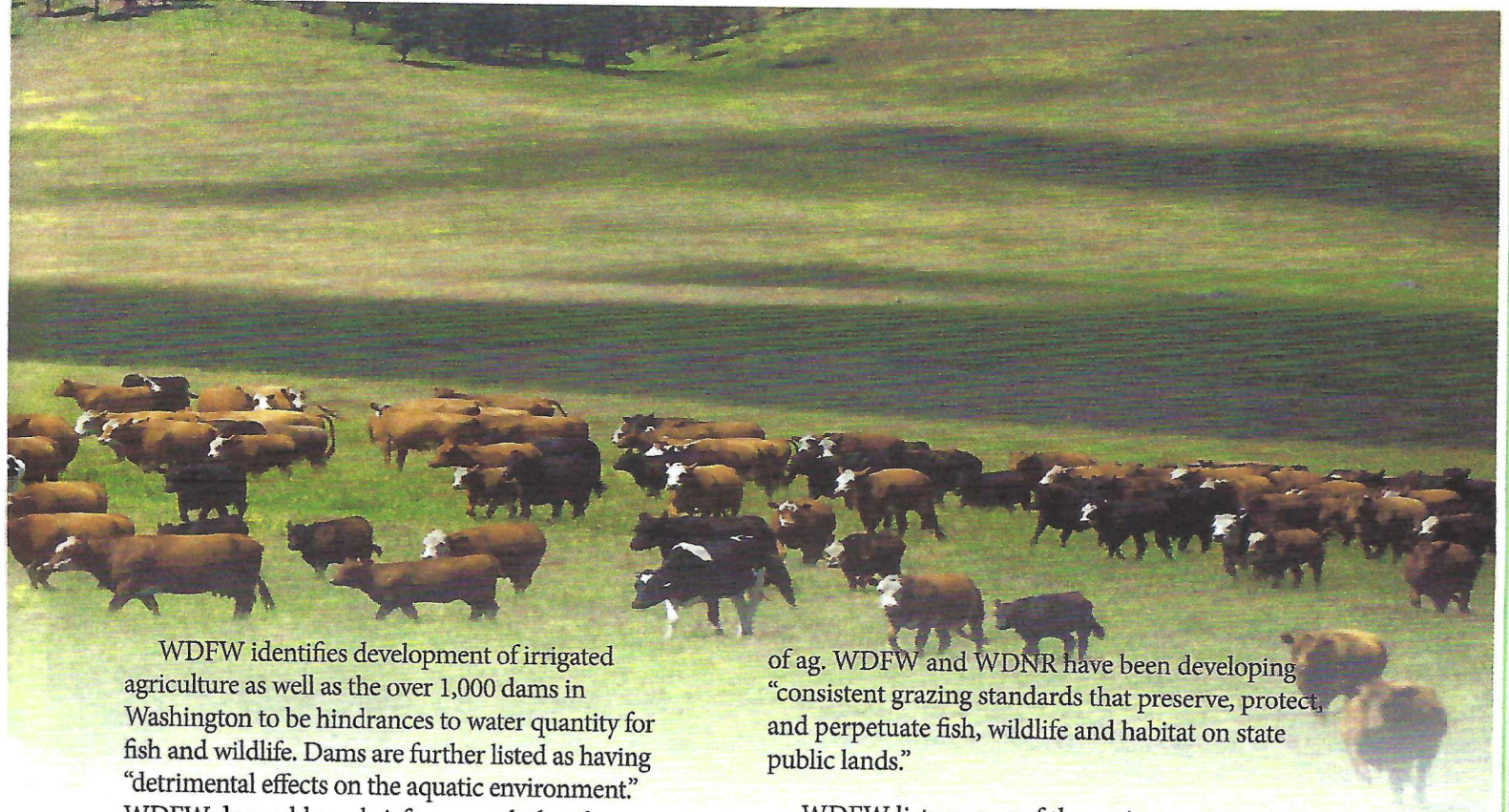
to continue to rise, substantial habitat base will continue to be lost. Puget Sound has the most "profound" losses and changes with the Columbia Plateau being listed as well due to the conversion of native to ag lands. Climate change is also listed as a cause of loss.

Key conservation challenges for fish, wildlife, and habitat base are listed in the document and include "water quantity- allocation and diversion of surface water; Water quality issues; Forest management issues; unsuitable agricultural and improper livestock grazing practices...." This is of course concerning to the WCA membership because ag, is as usual, being blamed without substantiation.

Water quantity is listed because the availability of water for wildlife and fish is the key to survival and a limiting factor. "Without adequate water to support fish and wildlife, other conservation issues become secondary." That is a quote from page 2-7. It is important for me because I would say the same thing about ag- without adequate water we cannot support livestock, we cannot support farming, we have no ag. Yet even with that very enlightening statement from WDFW, Washington is targeting ag stockponds which supply water for wildlife. Ranchers are literally supplying water to wildlife in arid areas where there is no other water source. The irony.



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WDFW identifies development of irrigated agriculture as well as the over 1,000 dams in Washington to be hindrances to water quantity for fish and wildlife. Dams are further listed as having “detrimental effects on the aquatic environment.” WDFW does add one brief paragraph that there are efforts to mitigate the adverse impacts to fish and wildlife that are ongoing and “better-funded.”

On the water quality section, WDFW lists quite a few quality problems inclusive of fecal coliform bacteria, contaminated sediments, increased sediment, excess nutrients and pesticides runoff, and so on. A shift in ocean chemistry is also identified as a problem. The good news is that in this section WDFW admits that water quality “is not a direct responsibility of WDFW.” The problem is that we can all see the writing on the wall, another Washington state agency trying to exceed their jurisdiction and force more rules and regulations down the throat of agriculture. Government overreach.

Logging and ag practices are identified as “conservation problems.” Overall loss of forest lands and logging practices are identified. WDFW wants to promote forest practices that protect fish and wildlife resources. Poor livestock grazing practices are identified as a practice that can destroy native habitat and wildlife, promote the spread of invasive plants, and reduce productivity of land. WDFW does recognize that properly managed grazing can be neutral or even beneficial to wildlife, but the focus of this section seems to be the negatives

of ag. WDFW and WDNR have been developing “consistent grazing standards that preserve, protect, and perpetuate fish, wildlife and habitat on state public lands.”

WDFW lists as one of the major conservation practices “habitat acquisition” and that means exactly what you think it does, purchase land. WDFW recognizes that this can be costly, but they partner with WDNR, WSFWS, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, the Trust for Public Land, and others. Through acquisition, WDFW owns or manages over one million acres of land.

SWAP is an action plan that is very impactful on agriculture and ranching. Luckily, we can ask the WCA to monitor this plan and in early 2025 (which isn't that far away!) we should have an update on the draft plan which WCA should be tasked with reviewing. WCA needs a seat at the table and to make sure cattlemen are not facing more regulation, more government overreach and more hurdles to jump when we just want to raise cattle. To see the full article please go to:

<https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/at-risk/swap>

As the county fair season comes to a close, I want to thank everyone out there that has come out to support the kids with their projects. We had a great time at the fair being part of our great community, showing off some good cattle, and reminding the public that ag is alive and well! 🍷

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