

October 31st, 2015

Jim Unsworth, Director
600 Capitol Way N.
Olympia, WA 98501-1091

RE: Comments on Washington's Wild Future: *A Partnership for Fish and Wildlife*

Dear Director Unsworth:

Thank you for providing an opportunity to provide input on the new multi-year initiative, *Washington's Wild Future: A Partnership for Fish and Wildlife*. As you develop a future vision for programs managed by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), we encourage you to continue to place greater emphasis on watchable wildlife, invest in conservation along river corridors, and improve public access to waterways. Engaging members of the public who may not fish or hunt but who value intact river ecosystems that support healthy fish and wildlife populations, will build a stronger and more effective department.

American Whitewater is a national 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that works to protect and restore our nation's headwaters, and enhance the public's ability to enjoy them safely. With approximately 6000 individual members and 100 locally-based affiliate clubs, we represent the conservation interests of whitewater enthusiasts across the country. Many of our members live in or travel to Washington State. We enjoy opportunities to experience fish and wildlife in their native habitat and we utilize river access sites managed by WDFW.

Watchable Wildlife

Over \$1.7 billion is spent annually on wildlife watching activities in Washington State and this investment supports more than 21,000 jobs, many of which are in rural communities.¹ Our members who enjoy recreational kayaking, canoeing, and rafting on waterways across the state enjoy opportunities to view fish and wildlife. As one example, thousands of visitors enjoy eagle watching on the Skagit River every year, an activity that brings tourism dollars to rural communities that would otherwise experience lower visitation during the winter months.

The WDFW Watchable Wildlife Program began in 1997, but only has one person and a budget of \$0.14 million.² As the fastest growing recreational activity in the United States,³ this investment in watchable wildlife needs to be increased.

¹ <http://wdfw.wa.gov/viewing/tourism/>

² Ibid.

Conservation Along River Corridors

Acquisition of land along river corridors represents an important investment for fish and wildlife conservation but has additional public benefits. We were strong supporters of the recent acquisition of 50,272 acres in the headwaters of the Yakima Basin watershed that were designated as the Teanaway Community Forest to be co-managed by the Washington State Department of Natural Resources and WDFW. The bold efforts to conserve important headwater areas and riparian corridors should continue to be prioritized. These initiatives directly benefit fish and wildlife, but they also protect the experience of those who recreate on our state's rivers by preventing riverside development and protecting water quality. Conserving undeveloped lands along river corridors also serves to protect our investment in restoration projects on rivers across the state.

We are concerned with recent efforts to expand hydropower in Washington State. As one example, Snohomish PUD has proposed a new hydropower project on the South Fork Skykomish River, a free-flowing river designated as a State Scenic Waterway, a protected area from hydropower development by the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, and recommended by the United States Forest Service for designation as a Wild and Scenic River. For many decades WDFW has been a national leader in protecting the public trust in hydropower licensing proceedings.⁴ A continued investment in technical capacity on instream flow issues and fishery impacts caused by hydropower needs to remain a priority given pending threats of new hydropower development and the fact that Washington State has more hydropower capacity than any other state in the country.⁵

Improving Public Access to Rivers

WDFW has made significant investments in access to rivers. As development pressure along rivers continues, public access to rivers is threatened. It is not enough to just conserve river corridors; the public needs a way to access rivers for public use and enjoyment. With the goal of expanding support for WDFW beyond the traditional hunting and fishing community, opportunities should be explored to improve public access for all who recreate on the state's waterways.

In expanding the base of constituents served, WDFW could start by focusing on access needs at property WDFW already owns and manages. One example is Sunset Falls on the South Fork Skykomish River. WDFW manages a trap and haul facility at the base of the falls on land owned by the State of Washington. Unfortunately public access to this site, one of the most important access points

³ Ibid.

⁴ See for example: Beecher, H.A. 1990. Standards for instream flows. *Rivers* 1(2):97-109.

⁵ Washington State leads the nation in production of hydroelectricity producing 30% of the nation's net hydroelectricity generation.

in the entire state for whitewater boaters, was closed in 2000. Opportunities to restore walk-in access to this site need to be explored. Another site that has represented an ongoing challenge is the fish ladder located at mile 2.0 on the Wind River at Shipherd Falls. While the common portage route around the falls is to walk along the fish ladder, WDFW staff have occasionally objected to this practice. At certain flows, the fish ladder and coffer dam at the bottom represent a hazard to navigation requiring a portage. The need to safely portage the in-water hazards at this site needs to be recognized.

Finally, we have been leaders in an effort to require Washington Department of Transportation to evaluate opportunities to enhance public access to waterways during major transportation projects such as bridge reconstruction.⁶ Similar efforts have been successful in California,⁷ Virginia,⁸ and Maryland.⁹ We believe that fishermen would similarly benefit from improved access at bridges, and believe an opportunity exists for collaboration on this initiative we plan to take up again in the 2016 legislative session.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on *Washington's Wild Future: A Partnership for Fish and Wildlife*. As you explore opportunities to expand the base of support for WDFW programs, we are eager to work together on opportunities to place greater emphasis on watchable wildlife, invest in conservation along river corridors, and improve public access to waterways. Please do not hesitate to reach out; we share your commitment to build a stronger and more effective department and appreciate your leadership in launching this important dialogue.

Sincerely,



Thomas O'Keefe, PhD
Pacific Northwest Stewardship Director

⁶ Washington State Legislature ESB6044 2015-2016

⁷ California Streets and Highway Code 991

⁸ <https://governor.virginia.gov/newsroom/newsarticle?articleId=11810>

⁹ <https://legiscan.com/MD/bill/HB797/2013>