



From: Yakima County Farm Bureau

To: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Date: 09-24-20

RE: Comments on WDFW 25 year plan

These comments are from the Yakima County Farm Bureau (YCFB). YCFB is a grass roots organization with 3100 members consisting of farmers and ranchers with operations both large and small as well as other folks with interest in agriculture affairs in Yakima and Klickitat Counties.

As a matter of principle the YCFB believes that the WDFW has chosen to purchase and manage lands it should not own. There is an adage that applies: If one can not take care of what one already owns, do not buy more! By any metric, the WDFW does not properly manage the lands it currently owns, yet it is charging full speed ahead purchasing lands at an ever increasing rate with no regard to the state of the property in the future.

Any successful farmer or rancher has a quality known as sweat equity. Any property that does not receive adequate sweat equity is headed for disaster.

A long standing pattern has developed about WDFW's land acquisitions: First a well maintained property becomes noticed by the Department. Next, the owner of the property is offered an extraordinarily excessive price such that any other potential buyer is locked out of buying it and more often, the Department is successful.

As WDFW does not pay property tax on lands it owns the tax base for the affected County takes a major hit because the property now is removed from the tax rolls. The Department is supposed to make Payment in lieu of taxes (PILT) which is meant to compensate to a degree the loss but thanks to the Legislature even that reduced amount has been reduced even farther.

The property that looked attractive in it's well managed condition to wildlife and the Department now begins to deteriorate in the absence of the sweat equity that caused WDFW to be interested in ranch or farm in the first place. The Department does utilize the Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) but there are too many needs, not only with WDFW projects but to the many other clients they assist. There simply just are not enough WCC to go around.

The newly acquired property becomes overwhelmed with invasive weeds. The fences used to manage the property's forage are first neglected and then removed. Watering locations are destroyed and removed. Fuels build up and massive fires result. The poster property for this is the LT Murray.

The YCFB believes that there is a much more important dynamic besides a blatant lack of sweat equity with the Department, however. It is very evident that WDFW is abhorrent to the practices of livestock grazing and logging.

Without grazing and logging, there is but one other “tool” left, that of wildfire. One can attempt to cover up the cause by arguing that “climate change” is at fault but fuel load trumps all. While the dryness of the fuel is a factor, the excessive fuel loads cause an exponential effect. Under the driest possible conditions, less fuel still equals much less fire. In reality if one believes in the debate over Climate Change, the need for fuel reduction becomes even more acute.

The YCFB finds the WDFW’s lack of understanding of forage palatability most bizarre. An elk, deer or other species relying in whole or in part on forage only requires but one bite to know the good from the bad. The next door farmer or rancher with good palatable forage becomes the loser because the wildlife trespass and eat there rather than on the Department lands where the forage has become woody and sooner or later catastrophically burns. A pilot program in Oregon studied the concept of layered grazing management, that of domestic grazing coupled with wildlife usage and from what the YCFB had heard, was quite promising.

WDFW, after spending a great amount of money and time, is scuttling the advice and wealth of work of the Wolf Advisory Group (WAG). Besides Department staff time, there was a lot of sacrifice from the many members of the WAG. The Washington State Farm Bureau was but one entity and our members (State-wide) paid for our representatives to attend the long process. The Governor first creates the process, and then after certain wolves destroy livestock and some have to be killed, changes the rules unilaterally and now blames the ranchers. This is the poorest form of governance. Does the Department and the Governor expect anyone to volunteer for similar activities in the future?

Under the current draft of this proposed plan, the Department will condition the very few existing grazing permits on WDFW lands whether wolves are known to occupy the area. The net effect is that once wolves enter an area, they in fact become the fuel managers of an area. Through Department direction what minimal amount of grazing by domestic animals will be terminated. Ironically, the wildlife that could graze in more heavily fuel laden areas will be driven off into poor habitats or more likely into neighboring managed properties. With certainty, the wolves will follow them leading to a very contentious relationship between the private property owner and the State.

The YCFB maintains that the WDFW would better serve sportsman, wildlife enthusiasts and all other citizens of the State by halting outright land purchases, begin identifying lands that would be better back in private hands and create a program where the Department pays for agricultural operators who agree to contract for wildlife enhancements. The property remains on the tax rolls. It still receives sweat equity. Wildlife enhancement can move forward at much less cost. Fire danger and fuel loads are also much better managed.

Hunter access to private land can be a contentious issue but it is not insurmountable. The overarching issue that causes land owners heartburn is from disrespectful sportsman. The Department can assist greatly in that regard if it has the will to do so.

To argue that private lands do not contribute greatly to wildlife on it's own is ridiculous. If that were the case, then why does the WDFW extoll a property's wildlife as a reason to pursue it? And why after it becomes owned by the State, and it deteriorates, those wildlife shift their activities to other property still in private ownership?

Recently, our County suffered from the Evans Canyon Fire. Tens of thousands of acres of Department and other lands burned. A number of homes were destroyed and farms were damaged. In the cross hairs was the overgrown and grossly mismanaged LT Murray. Besides the direct damages from the fire, the health of our area residents was also at risk as the fire raged for days and resulting smoke filled Central Washington. The YCFB wonders in the near future if citizens needlessly afflicted by smoke from these wildfires may in fact seek a legal challenge to large scale holders of property proven to mismanage their lands causing repeat large scale wildfires such as WDFW and the example of the LT Murray?

The YCFB believes that the Department must completely invert its failed policies and mismanagement and turn to common sense approaches to solving it's problems. The last thing it should do is to codify or enshrine its very poor practices into a twenty five year plan!

Instead, the YCFB urges the WDFW to resort to adaptive management. Seek managed livestock grazing opportunities and yes, LOG timber and thin over stocked stands of timber, both pre-commercial and commercially. Then at the right time of the year, prescribe burn when moisture levels are more safe. But most importantly, divest much of the Departments lands and become good neighbors and forge good partnerships with private land owners.

Your wildlife will ALSO thank you!

Mark Herke

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