



OAK CREEK WILDLIFE AREA 2012 MANAGEMENT PLAN UPDATE

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Land Management Summary

This is the most recent update to the 2006 Oak Creek Wildlife Area Management Plan http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans/

This plan provides management direction for the Oak Creek State Wildlife Area Complex including the 42,200 acre Oak Creek Wildlife Area unit; the 7,683 acre Cowiche Wildlife Area unit; the 10,000 acre Tieton Wildlife Area unit; the recent acquisition of the Rock Creek Wildlife Area (10,386 acres) unit in Kittitas County; and various smaller “satellite” units, all located in Yakima County, Washington. The plan identifies needs and guides activities on the area based on the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Mission of “*Sound Stewardship of Fish and Wildlife*” and its underlying statewide goals and objectives as they apply to local conditions.



Oak Creek Bull in the Rattlesnake Creek drainage
By Robert Inoué

Plans are updated as habitat and species conditions change, as new regulations and scientific knowledge develop, as public issues and concerns evolve and as administration of wildlife areas change. This management plan update includes 2010-2011 accomplishments, new issues, new land management strategies and performance measures for 2012.

Updates/Changes

Major changes that occurred in 2010-2011 affecting the wildlife area were the approvals and acquisition of the **Rock Creek Phase II parcels**, a **land exchange** between WDFW and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), updates to the **Oak Creek Road Maintenance and Abandonment Plan**, and development of the **Oak Creek Forest Restoration Project**. These activities highlight the management priority that WDFW has on acquiring and protecting critical habitats and intact landscapes for the benefit of the wildlife resources, and providing secure access for public recreation far into the future.

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Rock Creek Acquisition

The Rock Creek Unit (Figure 1) was expanded when the purchase of the second and third phases were completed in December 2011. The 7,711 acres were purchased with assistance from The Nature Conservancy and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. Funding for the purchase came from the Recreation and Conservation Office, Washington Wildlife Recreation Program (RCO WWRP) Critical Habitat grant and Section 6 grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The habitat includes alpine areas home to mountain goats, shrub steppe and basalt cliffs for elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep; and rivers and streams used by bull trout, cutthroat and rainbow trout as well as salmon. The property is 35 miles northwest of Yakima in Kittitas County, lying north of the Naches River in the Rock Creek, Gold Creek, Milk Creek and upper Wenas Creek drainages.

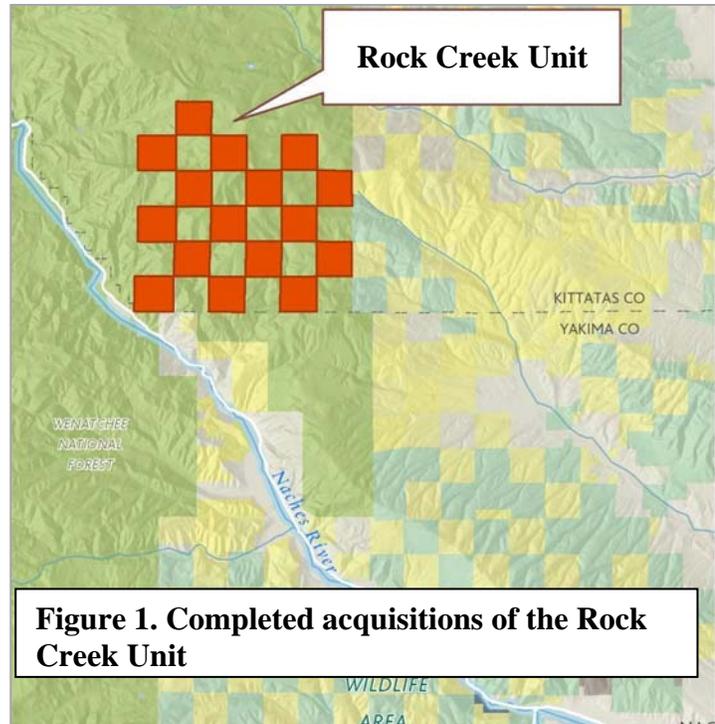


Figure 1. Completed acquisitions of the Rock Creek Unit

Land Exchange

The land exchange between WDFW and DNR is moving forward with Phase I finalized in April, 2011. Phase II of the land exchange which impacts the Oak Creek Wildlife Area is scheduled to be finalized by June 30, 2012. The Department of Natural Resources will consolidate ownership of forested sections, while WDFW will consolidate ownership of shrub steppe habitat. Eleven sections in the Rattlesnake drainage will be transferred to DNR, while WDFW will gain property in the Sanford Pasture, the Cowiche Unit and a small parcel near the Tieton River.

Road Maintenance and Abandonment Plans (RMAP)

In 2010 WDFW maintained 1.75 miles of road, cleaned two culverts and replaced one culvert. Work proposed for 2011 was not completed due to other priorities that developed following the May 2011 flood event. The four sections acquired by WDFW in the Rock Creek Unit were inventoried and added to the Oak Creek RMAP plan in 2010. In early 2011 it became apparent that many forest roads across the wildlife area had not been inventoried when the RMAP plan was developed, road numbers were not assigned, and in addition road needs had changed due to upcoming forest management. During the summer of 2011 all roads were re-inventoried, the RMAP plan for Oak Creek was updated and new information was submitted to DNR. Work proposed across Oak Creek Wildlife Area during 2012-2013 will bring a majority of the forest roads up to RMAP standards. This includes the removal of four fish passage barriers. Completion of the RMAP plan for lands proposed to go to DNR are on hold pending finalization of Phase II of the land exchange between DNR and WDFW. During 2012, twelve sections added to the Rock Creek Unit will be inventoried and added to the Oak Creek RMAP plan.

Oak Creek Forest Restoration Project

Oak Creek Staff has been working for several years with the The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to implement a large scale forest restoration project on the recently acquired Tieton Unit.

Historically, the area was shaped by frequent fire, but years of fire exclusion and past harvest practices have altered forest structure and composition creating a high risk of uncharacteristic fire, insect and disease effects. These conditions have disrupted many ecological processes, including trophic webs, nutrient cycles, tree growth and mortality and disturbance processes. The Nature Conservancy has been using a National Fire Plan grant to develop this project. In 2011, TNC and University of Washington completed the Tieton/Oak Creek Landscape Assessment and Treatment Prioritization, which assesses and prioritizes stands for treatment. This analysis identified two desired future conditions for forested stands: 1) large tree, open mosaic conditions; and 2) large tree, multistory conditions.

During 2011 field work was completed to lay out units and we have identified up to 758 acres for a commercial timber thinning, and 1,200 acres for non commercial thinning. Following thinning operations prescribed burning will be used to reduce fuels and restore a more natural cycle on several units, including a 4,900 acres landscape prescribed burn across ownerships. During the winter of 2011 cultural review and a State Environmental Policy Act approval was completed. The commercial timber sale will move forward during 2012 and funding is currently being sought to implement the non-commercial thinning and prescribed burning.



Oak Creek Forest Restoration
Project Area Pictures
The Nature Conservancy

Major Stewardship Accomplishments

Cowiche Mill Road Fire

On July 19, 2010 a fire started along Cowiche Mill Road near the wildlife area. High winds pushed the fire quickly south up Cowiche Mountain and then east towards Yakima. The fire burned a total of 5,834 acres; 1,131 acres of which was on wildlife area. The fire burned stands of big sagebrush, antelope bitterbrush and native bunch grass, reducing available forage for wildlife and creating an erosion threat. In addition to habitat loss, four miles of elk fence were damaged, and the residence located on the Worrell Ranch property, recently acquired by WDFW, sustained fire and smoke damage.



Cowiche Mill Road Fire, July 2010
Oak Creek Staff

Following the fire, a Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation grant was secured to seed 80 acres with a native grass mix and to install erosion control measures in heavily burned canyons. Seeding was completed by Oak Creek staff in the fall of 2010 and straw wattles were installed in several canyons to control runoff. In 2011, capital funds for fire restoration were used to purchase an additional 100 acres of seed and to assist with noxious weed control. Four permanent photo monitoring points were installed during the spring and

the first set of pictures post fire was completed, photos will be retaken annually to assess recovery from the fire. Utilizing fire restoration funds, WDFW's spartina crew assisted with Scotch thistle control in the burned area. In the fall of 2011, the seeding of 100 acres was completed. Weed control efforts will be ongoing for several years to get Scotch thistle under control. During the fall of 2010 the elk fence was rebuilt utilizing the Yakima Construction Shop. All work was completed prior to elk arriving and at a reduced cost from past elk fence construction.

Weed management

Wildlife area staff continues to work in close coordination with the Yakima County Noxious Weed Board (YCNWB) to address the recent rapid spread of Dalmatian toadflax, particularly along the Naches River and the Highway 410 corridor. Biological control agents (*Mecinus janthinus*) were released by YCNWB along the Naches River, and an additional release was completed in the Sanford Pasture area in 2011. Establishment of control agents and amount of control is being monitored by both Wildlife Area staff and YCNWB. Biological control agents are established at several sites and appear to be impacting the Dalmatian toadflax. Two additional releases of biological control agents for diffuse knapweed were completed in 2011. Establishment of these control agents and the amount of control is being monitored by Wildlife Area staff and YCNWB. Based on monitoring of biological control of knapweed appears to be

limited. *Weed control and use of biological agents was an important issue identified by the CAG.* Oak Creek staff is also an active member in the South Central Washington Cooperative Weed Management Area (CWMA). The CWMA is working to improve coordination and weed control efforts on a variety of priority weed species.



Northern Pacific Rattlesnake
Oak Creek Staff

Administration

During 2011 Oak Creek Wildlife Area was able to upgrade our outdated and problem prone winter feed trucks. Through the federal surplus program four 5-ton military trucks were purchased. The trucks are being converted to winter feeding trucks and the old feed trucks will be sent to state surplus. At the beginning of the 2010-2011 winter feeding season the wildlife areas 30+ year old tractor that was used to move hay and load feed trucks broke down and was not able to be

repaired. In the fall of 2011 funding was secured to purchase a new tractor and needed attachments.

In 2008, 75% of the South Fork Cowiche Creek water right was trusted under the Washington Water Trust Program for five years to leave the water in stream to benefit in-stream flow. Oak Creek Staff had no irrigation needs for the Cowiche Water Right, so in 2011 all of the water was put into the trust program for 10 years. The water right will be monitored until removed from the trust program in 2021, at that time the water will need to be put to beneficial use within five years or put back into the trust program.

Oak Creek staff worked with other Region 3 wildlife area managers and contracted with DNR to update the Green Dot Road Management area maps for the first time since 2003. New maps were printed in 2011, prior to the hunting season. Maps are now in a digital format, making it easier to do updates and eventually to provide maps in an online format.

Powerlines used to provide electrical service from Highway 410 to facilities located on Cleman's Mountain were determined to be owned by WDFW in 2011. The powerlines were installed in the 1950's by WDFW, for communications equipment, currently all use is by DNR and WA State Patrol. WDFW began negotiations with Pacific Power and Light (PP&L) and in October 2011 ownership of the power lines was transferred to PP&L.

Infrastructure Removal

Property acquired by WDFW under the RCO WWRP program had several structures that needed to be removed to comply with the grant requirements. During June 2011 several out- buildings located on the old Yakima Tieton Irrigation District property along the South Fork of Cowiche Creek were removed by personnel from the Yakima Construction Shop. The residence located on the Worrell Ranch was damaged during the Cowiche Mill Road Fire. The house was

demolished by the Yakima Construction Shop and site was reclaimed. During the process, several storage containers and other items were also removed from the site. During the demolition process many items were salvaged from the building for use on wildlife areas in Region 3.

A building and radio tower used by the Naches Valley School District located on Cleman's Mountain was demolished and removed by school district personnel in November 2011. The school district moved their radio communications facility into adjacent DNR facilities. Now all facilities on Cleman's Mountain are on DNR land.

Status Report of 2010-2011 Performance Measures

Key performance measures are identified each year to monitor progress and identify any issues that might interfere with planned priority activities. This information will be used to delete, add or alter priority strategies for 2012.

2010-11 Performance Measure	Status of Performance Measure	Explanation of Progress/Related Activity/ Comments
Maintain five elk and bighorn sheep feed sites to control wintering populations.	Fed approx. 4,000+ animals per day through the winter.	Moderate winters both years, with late springs. Fed late into March. Still have surplus hay.
Maintain winter range vehicle and early spring area closures.	Closures reduce disturbance to wintering wildlife when animal energy levels are low. Eyes in the Woods (EITW) remote camera system installed in 2010-2011, plus Enforcement efforts and media events have reduced elk disturbance.	Improved coordination with Enforcement has helped and needs to be maintained. EITW cameras have helped and need to work to secure funding to continue the program.
Perform mandatory weed control on wildlife area and coordinate with YCNWB.	Staff controlled Scotch thistle, knapweed, and numerous other weeds species on 5,000+ acres annually.	Increased land ownership with no additional staffing has reduced ability to treat all areas.
Complete new Point of Diversion paperwork for the Oak Creek Water Right and submit to Dept. of Ecology	Paperwork submitted and Pende Lite approved in August 2011.	New diversion will be used and we will work with Ecology on final approval.
Maintain active partnership in Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative	Active member, attend meetings regularly, member of monitoring group.	Continue to work with Tapash to implement additional projects.
Maintain golden eagle nest closures as needed.	Eagle activity was monitored annually and a closure installed around active nests.	In 2010-2011 nest was not located in main climbing area. Closure area was clearly marked and avoided.
Maintain 32 miles of elk fence	Staff inspected and repaired	Majority of fence in poor

on wildlife area.	fence annually. Installed cattle guard on Cowiche Mill Rd and removed about 1 mile of fence.	condition and needs replacement. Four miles on wildlife area rebuilt following Fire in 2010.
Coordinate with TNC to prioritize treatments in Tieton Township. Work to complete habitat restoration.	Treatment units determined. Moving forward on commercial sale, non commercial thinning and prescribed burn. Secured RMEF grant to complete some work.	TNC has laid out all commercial units. SEPA is completed. Unit will be marked in 2012 and plan to be sold. Moving forward with funding for non-commercial work and prescribed burn.
Draft operational plan for Tieton Township and Rock Creek Unit.	Plan has not been completed.	Will be included in new wildlife area management plan.
Provide guidance and liaison with Wildlife Education Corp (WEC) volunteer group to staff visitor center.	WEC continued to staff visitor center and provide education to thousands of public each year. Another 2-year ALEA grant successfully awarded in 2011.	Continue working with WEC and assist in applying for ALEA grant in 2013.
Complete MOU with Cowiche Canyon Conservancy (CCC) to manage in-holding on Snow Mt Ranch.	MOU has not been completed. Staff has discussed best way to form agreement with CCC.	Continue to work with CCC to manage land and work toward developing an MOU.
Monitor grazing permit on Worrell Ranch. Complete invoices and range evaluation.	Completed annual monitoring in 2010 and 2011. Submitted invoices for payment.	Grazing deferred on one pasture in 2011 following Cowiche Mill Rd fire. Grazing permit expires in 2012.
Complete application and present project to RCO for WWRP Critical Habitat grant for Cowiche Unit.	Completed all application material with help from CCC and presented to RCO. Grant ranked 6 th and was not funded.	Continue to seek funding opportunities to acquire property from willing sellers to complete Cowiche Watershed Protection Project.
Complete display for information kiosks at HQ and big horn sheep sites.	Not completed. No information on what the design or plan was for kiosks.	Working to develop new plan for kiosks.
Pursue additional funding for restoration projects through grants.	Successfully secured two RMEF grants and in the process of submitting a RCO WWRP State Lands Restoration Grant.	Grants will be completed in 2012-2013. Continue to submit for other grants to complete projects.
Inventory road system within existing RMAP's for the Rock Creek unit to determine priority of maintenance needs	RMAP plan for Rock Creek completed in 2010, all RMAP plans updated in 2011 to include road numbers, changes	Additional lands added to Rock Creek Unit will be inventoried in 2012.

relating to fish passage issues.	in need and roads not included in original plan.	
Meet with CAG to discuss management activities and address emerging issues	Met with CAG in 2010 and 2011.	Continue with CAG meetings and maintain an active CAG membership.

New Strategies

The wildlife area plan identifies many strategies or activities to address agency strategic plan goals and objectives, why the area was purchased, habitat conditions, species presence, and public issues and concerns. The following updated strategies have been added to respond to previously unaddressed or new issues or changes on the wildlife area. New strategies may also be in response to adaptive management as staff evaluate the impacts of past management activities.

If the Citizens Advisory Group provided public comments on new issues, they will be identified (*in italics*) at the end of this document. Although underlined strategies have no current funding source, identifying these needs is the first step to securing additional funds.



California Big Horn Sheep
By Oak Creek Staff

2012-13 Performance Measures

Performance measures for the Oak Creek Wildlife Area are listed below. Accomplishments and progress toward desired outcomes will be monitored and evaluated annually.

- 1) Meet with CAG to discuss management activities and address emerging issues.
- 2) Maintain five elk and bighorn sheep winter feeding sites to control wintering populations.
- 3) Maintain 32 miles of elk fence on the Oak Creek Wildlife Area.
- 4) Maintain winter range vehicle closure and early spring area closure.
- 5) Perform mandatory weed control on Oak Creek Wildlife Area and coordinate with YCNWB.
- 6) Maintain seasonal golden eagle closures along Tieton River as needed.
- 7) Inventory road system within existing RMAP's for 12 new sections in the Rock Creek Unit to determine priority of maintenance needs relating to fish passage issues.

- 8) Coordinate with The Nature Conservancy to complete forest restoration treatments for the Oak Creek Forest Restoration Project using National Fire Plan grant, RMEF PAC grant, and Jobs Bill funding.
- 9) Seek additional funding to complete the Oak Creek Forest Restoration Project. Including an RCO WWRP State Lands Restoration grant.
- 10) Maintain active participation in Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative.
- 11) Draft new Oak Creek Management Plan and add management for newly acquired properties.
- 12) Work with Cowiche Canyon Conservancy to manage inholding (Thornton Acquisition) on Snow Mountain Ranch.
- 13) Monitor grazing permit on Worrell Ranch, complete invoices and bi-annual range evaluation.
- 14) Continue restoration efforts following Cowiche Mill Road Fire and continue with annual photo monitoring.
- 15) Develop new use of kiosks boards at Oak Creek, working with The Nature Conservancy and Cowiche Canyon Conservancy.
- 16) Continue to work with WDFW staff and landowner to resolve access issues to Mud Lake/Sanford Pasture.
- 17) Liaison with the Oak Creek Wildlife Education Corp (WEC) to submit a new 2-year ALEA grant to support volunteer operations in 2013.
- 18) Utilize existing funding to install gates on non-green dot roads and update green dot reader boards.
- 19) Pursue additional funding for restoration projects through grants (RMEF, NWTF etc).



Cowiche Elk
by Oak Creek Staff

Citizens Advisory Group Input

Oak Creek CAG meetings were held on April 26, 2011 and March 27, 2012.

The following issues and inputs were addressed at the April 28, 2011 meeting. Member comments are in italics.

Attendee's

Don Witke-Wildlife Education Core
Dick Jacobson-Yakima County Noxious Weed Board
Reese Lolley-TNC
Paul Ziemantz-Motorized Recreation
Jim Stephenson-Yakama Nation
Ken McNamee-WA DNR
Brien Wiens-Fishing
Jim Walkenhauer-Hunting
Frank and Stormy Sweet-RMEF
Joan St. Hilaire-USFS

Issue: Update on progress of 2011 performance measures.

Response: *How large is the grazing lease on Worrell Ranch? It is 2,340 acres. Will the lease be renewed? No, the lease expires in 2012 and will not be renewed.*

Issue: The spring closure is currently March 1 thru May 1, the proposal is to extend that to start when winter feeding begins and end on May 1. This would potentially provide more area for elk free of human disturbance and make the Oak Creek closure area the same as other wildlife area closures in the region.

Response: *After a discussion on the reason for extending the time of the closure some CAG members expressed concern for closing more public land to access when there is no evidence of an issue with people entering the area and disturbing wintering elk during the proposed time period (Dec-March). This closure would also reduce opportunities for predator hunting and other winter recreation. They felt this proposal should be tabled until there was more evidence of a need for a longer closure. A majority of CAG members present supported extending the closure primarily to create consistency for the public and law enforcement, as well as to reduce the potential of disturbance to wintering elk. This proposal will move forward through the WDFW process for proposing closures which uses input from the CAG in the decision making process. This process may take a couple of years and will include public comment. New Oak Creek green dot maps will be modified to show the difference in the closure on Oak Creek Wildlife Area versus other Wildlife Areas in Region 3.*

Issue: Proposal to expand the closure boundary to cross Oak Creek and extend up to Indian Creek. This expansion would close the USFS 1400 Oak Creek Road to foot traffic. The change was proposed to reduce the potential for individuals sneaking into the closure area and would reduce disturbance to wintering and spring grazing elk.

Response: *In general the CAG was not in support of this idea at the present. Based on information presented from Eyes in the Woods cameras and WDFW observations fewer people*

seemed to be entering the closure illegally. This closure would remove an opportunity for accessing public lands during the winter and early spring by closing the Oak Creek Road to foot traffic. This issue will be tabled pending additional information from Eyes in the Woods monitoring and wildlife area staff observations.

Issue: Proposed surplus of West Valley feed site property. WDFW has not fed elk there for 2 years and the property is part of a homeowners association. Lots could potentially be sold and provide additional revenue to the department.

Response: *The CAG did not have an issue with selling the property. They would like to look into the idea of a land exchange with someone who owns property adjoining the wildlife area. They would also like to see a stipulation in the sale where the money would stay in the region and be used to support the wildlife area. WDFW is researching the fund source used to acquire the property and this will influence the method of disposal. There is potential for a land exchange, this is 2-4 year process. Also, if the property is sold there is potential for the money to be used to purchase additional priority property across the state.*

Issue: Update on additional items including: Mud lake access, DNR/WDFW land exchange, Rock Creek/Bald Mountain Phase II, proposed timber management/prescribed burning on wildlife area, Cowiche Mill Road fire, Yakima elk herd study, Rock Creek temporary grazing permit, Habitat Conservation Plan and the Discover Pass.

Response: *The CAG had questions about proposed timber management and loss of escape cover for elk, and would like to see input from Scott McCorquodale. The proposed actions would create a landscape mosaic of different overstory and understory densities. The goal is to improve wildlife habitat and reduce the susceptibility of the area to disease and wildfire. We will review all proposed actions with WDFW biologists, foresters and elk specialists prior to any actions. Is the elk fence rebuild completed? Yes, the fence was repaired before the opening of the modern firearm elk season. What is being done to reduce the potential for contact between wild and domestic sheep? We have modified the grazing route, added monitoring measures and WDFW staff will be on site while grazing is occurring, and in addition we will try to collar several big horn sheep to monitor movements. *No grazing will occur during 2012 while domestic sheep grazing is being evaluated. Do hunting/fishing license holders have to purchase a Discover Pass? No, they will receive a permit with the purchase of a license, in addition if you volunteer 24 hours with WDFW, DNR or State Parks you can receive a pass for free.*

The following issues and inputs were addressed at the March 27, 2012 meeting. Member comments are in italics.

Attendee's

Don Witke-Wildlife Education Core
Dick Jacobson-Yakima County Noxious Weed Board
Reese Lolley-TNC
Paul Gonseth-WA DOT
Jim Stephenson-Yakama Nation
Ken McNamee-WA DNR
Larry Robinson-Watchable Wildlife/Audubon
Jim Walkenhauer-Hunting

Betsy Bloomfield-Cowiche Canyon Conservancy
Joan St. Hilaire-USFS
Don Forgey-Adjacent Landowner

Issue: Update from USFS on road damage and repairs from the May 2011 flood event presented by Mike Collins-engineer and Michelle King-NEPA planner.

Response: *Questions about timeline and NEPA process.*

Issue: Presentation on Oak Creek Forest Restoration Project. CAG was asked for input and support for the project.

Response: *Overall the CAG members present supported moving forward with the project. Questions were asked about notification before prescribed burns are started, grants and funding sources and information on our plans to experiment with bio-char. The group also requested a field trip to see the project. Prior to any prescribed burning a burn plan will be developed that will detail notification to media, the general public and adjacent landowners. The use of bio-char to store carbon and return it to the soil is in the experimental stages and we are currently seeking opportunities to experiment with the use. During the summer of 2012 a field trip will be scheduled to tour the project area with CAG members and other interested groups.*

Issue: Green dot reader board upgrade and installing gates on non green dot roads

Response: *The group supports improving sign, recommended bolding key words to make it more noticeable. The group also supports installing gates on some roads and removing berms that are restricting administrative access. Questions were asked about the cost per gate and seeking the best cost and about money to maintain the gates once installed. The informal bid process with bids from at least three contractors will be used to find the best cost for gate construction. Opportunities exist to utilize volunteer groups for gate construction and installation. In addition wildlife area staff will research the option of using welding/fabrication students at community colleges and technical institutes (i.e. Perry Tech) for gate construction. Maintenance of gates will be absorbed into the management budget for the wildlife area.*

Issue: Proposed 2012 performance measures.

Response: *A CAG member asked about the impact of closing two feed sites on the remaining feed sites. Removing two feed sites in the Cowiche area has resulted in increased use of the Stinson feed site, but has reduced staff time and equipment needed perform feeding operations. Cowiche Canyon Conservancy and The Nature Conservancy expressed an interest in working with WDFW to develop information for the unused kiosks that were constructed at the HQ and the sheep feed site. Oak Creek staff will work with these groups to put these kiosks to use over the next two years. CAG supports moving forward with resolving the access issues at Mud Lake.*

Contacts:

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Want to see the full plan?

Go to -

http://wdfw.wa.gov/lands/wildlife_areas/management_plans