

Natural Resources Building
1111 Washington St SE
Olympia WA 98501

PO Box 40917
Olympia WA 98504-0917



(360) 902-3000
TTY (360) 902-1996
Fax: (360) 902-3026

E-mail: info@rco.wa.gov
Web site: www.rco.wa.gov

STATE OF WASHINGTON

RECREATION AND CONSERVATION OFFICE

October 12, 2007

Topic #18: WWRP Project Ranking by State Agencies – Policy Issues

Prepared and Presented By: Kammie Bunes

Approved by the Director: *O.P.*

Proposed Action: Discussion

Summary

On August 27, Recreation and Conservation Office staff requested comment from interested parties on whether or not state agency priorities and internal ranking of their project proposals should be taken into consideration in the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program's evaluation process. This memorandum summarizes the proposed options and comments, and outlines staff's recommendation for modifications to existing program policies.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends no change to the existing evaluation criteria. Existing criteria provide adequate opportunity for all applicants to address how their proposals are consistent with a wide variety of plans, including those specific to state agency priorities.

Background

The Washington State Legislature established the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program¹ (WWRP) in 1990. State agencies² are eligible applicants for all of the categories in the Habitat Conservation Account, which includes:

- Critical Habitat
- Natural Areas
- State Lands Restoration and Enhancement
- Urban Wildlife Habitat

¹ WWRP is codified in RCW 79A.15 and WAC 286-27.

² State agencies mean State Parks and the Washington Departments of Natural Resources, General Administration, and Fish and Wildlife.



Local agencies and Native American tribes are eligible for Critical Habitat and Urban Wildlife Habitat funding. The Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (RCFB) adopts eligibility and evaluation criteria used for each category.

The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) typically submit multiple projects in each of the Habitat Conservation Account categories. Each agency has internal plans and strategies that allow them to prioritize and, in some instances, rank projects before submitting grant applications to the RCFB. Examples include DNR's *Natural Heritage Plan* and WDFW's *Lands 20/20*. There have been several instances where the WWRP evaluation team's ranking of projects within a habitat conservation category has not been consistent with an agency's internal ranking.

Analysis

Stakeholders were asked to comment on whether or not the RCFB should modify its existing evaluation criteria to incorporate the priorities established by state agencies in all or some categories in the Habitat Conservation Account. Specifically, they had an opportunity to comment on the following three options.

- ➔ **Option 1:** Add a new criterion to specifically address state agency priorities and rankings in the evaluation process.

Pros	Cons
Provides greater recognition of state agency expertise in prioritizing habitat needs.	State agency priorities may not always match WWRP priorities in statute or adopted by the RCFB.
	Local agencies may perceive this as an unfair advantage to state agency projects.
	Existing criteria already allow applicants to explain how their proposal fits state, regional, and/or local priorities.

- ➔ **Option 2:** Add a new criterion to specifically address state and local agency priorities in the evaluation process or to increase the number of points associated with the current question addressing plans and prioritization efforts.

Pros	Cons
Places more emphasis on consistency with plans and prioritization efforts.	Existing criteria already allow applicants to explain how their proposal fits state, regional, and/or local priorities.

Provides an equal opportunity for local agencies to receive extra consideration.	An increased number of points for consistency with plans and prioritization efforts could mean a decreased emphasis on habitat values.
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Option 3: No change to the existing evaluation criteria.

Pros	Cons
The Habitat Conservation Account (HCA) evaluation criteria already places substantial value on plan consistency. In each of the four HCA categories there is an evaluation question that asks whether the project is supported by a current plan or prioritization effort.	Agencies believe that they should have more say in the rank of their projects.
Existing criteria were designed to reward those projects that best meet the priorities cited in the enabling legislation for HCA and additional priorities established by the RCFB. Agency priorities may or may not match these priorities.	

Stakeholders expressed a preference to leave the evaluation criteria as is. Those who supported a change preferred Option 2, which would not favor state plans or prioritization efforts over local plans or efforts. If Option 2 were adopted it was suggested that minimum criteria such as stakeholder involvement and risk assessment should be factored into the agencies' prioritization process.

Next Steps

Public comments on the proposed options referenced above were distributed to the Board at the September 14 RCFB meeting. Comments received by October 25 on staff's recommendation as presented in this memorandum will be distributed to the Board electronically in advance of the November meeting.

If the Board approves the staff's recommendation, no manual update is required. If the Board adopts a change, staff will update Manual #10b, *WWRP Habitat Conservation Account and Riparian Protection Account: Policies and Project Selection* and send out notices to potential applicants and other interested parties. Adopted changes will affect grant requests beginning with the 2008 grant cycle.