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# Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group

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**2012 PROGRESS REPORT**

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## BACKGROUND

In 2007, the Washington State Legislature created the Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group<sup>1</sup> to improve the visibility and coordination of habitat and recreation land purchases and disposals by state agencies.

The Legislature wanted to ensure that state agencies acquiring lands were coordinating their efforts with one another and making their efforts more visible to the public.

State lawmakers and others have wanted to know: Are state agencies acquiring habitat and recreation lands for a strategic reason and not just as opportunities arise? Are state agencies talking to each other? Are agencies duplicating one another's roles, or do the habitat and recreation land programs within different agencies have distinct purposes that complement one another?

At the same time, a combination of state, federal, and nonprofit land buyers using different planning processes has made it difficult for citizens to know what is going on in their regions. Citizens and local governments want to know: Which purchasers are planning to buy land in a region? What land is planned for purchase? Why is the land being purchased? How can citizens get involved in the planning process?

Since 2007, the lands group has become a key vehicle for improving the visibility and coordination of land purchases by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington Department of Natural Resources, and the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission. The lands group makes state acquisition projects more visible and coordinated at key points before, during, and after they are completed.

The lands group visibility and coordination process occurs on the biennial funding cycle and has the following components:

- **Annual Coordinating Forum:** The Annual State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum brings together state agencies, local governments, non-government organizations, landowners, tribes, and citizens to learn about and share ideas on proposals for state habitat and recreation land purchases and disposals.
- **Biennial Forecast Report:** The *State Land Acquisition Forecast Report* gives information about the state land purchases and disposals that are being planned around the state.
- **Biennial Performance Monitoring Report:** The *Biennial State Land Acquisition Performance Monitoring Report* shows whether state agencies achieved their initial acquisition project objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Substitute Senate Bill 5236

The lands group is comprised of representatives from the following state natural resource agencies:

- Department of Ecology
- Department of Fish and Wildlife
- Department of Natural Resources
- Department of Transportation
- Puget Sound Partnership
- Recreation and Conservation Office
- State Conservation Commission
- State Parks and Recreation Commission

The lands group also includes representatives of nonprofit organizations, local governments, the Legislature, and others including the Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy, Washington Forest Protection Association, Pacific Coast Joint Venture, and the Washington Association of Land Trusts (See Attachment A). The Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) provides staff support and hosts the lands group's Web site.

The lands group is assigned 11 legislative directives aimed at improving state land acquisition and disposal coordination and visibility. If resources are scarce, five of these tasks are to be prioritized. The lands group meets quarterly and hosts the Annual State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum for state agencies, local governments, non-government organizations, landowners, tribes, and citizens to share ideas on proposals for state habitat and recreation land purchases and disposals.

This memorandum is submitted on behalf of the lands group to satisfy the reporting requirement in subsection (2) of the Revised Code of Washington 79A.25.260<sup>2</sup>.

## **2012 HIGHLIGHTS**

### **LANDS GROUP EXTENDED TO 2017**

In March 2012, Governor Chris Gregoire signed a bill extending the lands group's sunset date to July 2017<sup>3</sup>. The extension shows the importance of the group, especially as boards and commissions are under increased pressure to perform. In addition to extending the sunset date, 5 of the 11 statutory tasks were prioritized, if resources are scarce. The extension did not come with funding for the group.

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<sup>2</sup> Attachment B: Enabling Legislation

<sup>3</sup> Senate Bill 6385

## COORDINATING VISIBILITY OF LAND MAINTENANCE FUNDING

Now, with an increasing demand for public accountability, it is more important than ever to ensure that each state land acquisition project is a good investment of public resources. To decide whether it's a good investment, the public wants to know how purchased land will be maintained. While acquisitions and land maintenance are budgeted separately, there is increasing demand to understand how the capital investment in buying the land relates to the impact on the operating budget for maintaining the land. Legislators and other attendees of the 2012 Annual State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum said they want to know early in the funding process how lands planned for purchase will be maintained.

Throughout 2012, the lands group explored options for identifying operating and maintenance expenses and making them more transparent early in the acquisition planning process. Earlier this year, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife presented to the lands group on the status of operation and maintenance funding for Department of Fish and Wildlife lands.

[The presentation](#) showed that the Department of Fish and Wildlife invests significant funding in land maintenance. The agency's biennial lands division's operating budget is about \$24 million and comes from several sources. Overall key points of the presentation are:

- The Department of Fish and Wildlife invests more than \$10 million a year on its lands.
- The level of service that the Department of Fish and Wildlife provides with this funding is exceptional.
- Operation and capital funding trends are going up (Discover Pass).
- Current acquisition rates are not expected to impact negatively base funding for operation and maintenance through at least 2015.

One option the lands group discussed is to require agencies to identify operation and maintenance costs as part of the funding request for projects. A challenge with this option is that agencies use different approaches to calculate maintenance costs.

Another option is to include estimated operating and maintenance expenses for planned state land acquisition projects in the biennial *State Land Acquisition Forecast Report*. It gives information and maps about the state land purchases that are proposed for funding. The report is published biennially at least six months before funding is approved by the Legislature. A challenge to this option is that operating expense data usually is not available by the time the forecast report is published.

## ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF STATE LAND ACQUISITIONS – IMPROVING VISIBILITY

Washington State natural resource agencies – Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Natural Resources, and State Parks and Recreation Commission – purchase land to protect important state resources such as recreation opportunities and habitat for threatened and endangered species. As

population increases, there is greater need to preserve these resources for current and future generations.

At the same time, population growth and declining revenues has led to an increased scrutiny of the costs and benefits of state land ownership. Costs and benefits can be economic and non-economic (e.g. social, cultural, and environmental). State agencies are being asked more and more: “How much land is enough?”

To learn more about expected economic benefits of proposed acquisition projects, RCO is asking grant applicants what they think those benefits will be. Here are some examples of applicant responses:

HEART OF THE CASCADES, DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

“The site is a popular area for recreation: camping, hiking, ORV use, birding, and hunting are all popular activities on the project site. Combined, these user-groups spend thousands of recreation days on the project lands and adjoining public lands, thereby contributing to the local economy in Kittitas County. Once the acquisition is completed, project partners plan to implement forest restoration projects that will create jobs for loggers and foresters, and supply wood for local mills and biomass businesses.”

CAPE DISAPPOINTMENT SEAVIEW DUNES, STATE PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION

“The Project will increase the available recreation and habitat areas along the Pacific Ocean. The Long Beach and Seaview Dunes area draws many tourists from outside the local community, which in turn increases the economic support through tax revenues for the hotel, motel, grocery and gas businesses as well as the various specialty shops and museums.”

DABOB BAY NATURAL AREA, DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

“Economic benefits that will result from this project will include job creation through acquisition due diligence (appraisal, survey, environmental assessments, title and legal work). It will also improve growing conditions for nearby shellfish farmers. Finally, the ecosystem services provided by conserving this property represent significant economic benefits with zero costs to taxpayers. These services include protection of a landscape scale intact coastal estuarine system and adjacent forest communities as well as improving water quality and providing climate change stabilization, protection/buffering against sea level rise, landslide and contaminant/sediment introduction into the bay.”

At lands group meetings, state land management agencies are discussing how to analyze the impacts of acquisitions on local communities. Nationwide studies and studies in other states show that outdoor recreation makes a significant contribution to the economy.<sup>4</sup> While similar studies on the benefits of habitat land have not been conducted in Washington State, outdoor recreation activities often are conducted on lands conserved for habitat. The agencies do not have the expertise in-house to conduct a

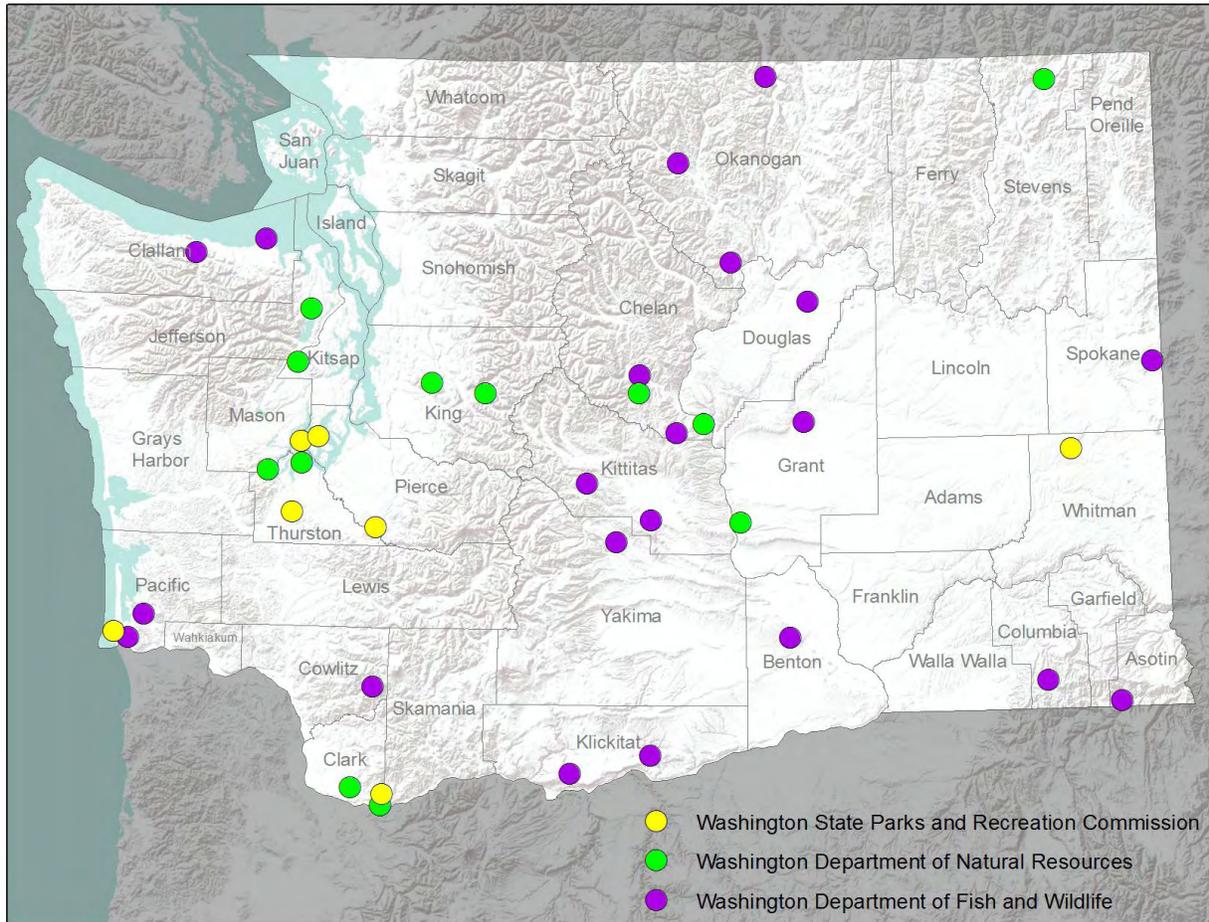
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<sup>4</sup> For example, a 2012 report jointly released by the Western Governors’ Association and the outdoor recreation industry shows that outdoor recreation trips and equipment generated about \$646 billion in the United States in 2011.

comprehensive economic impact study, but they are brainstorming options for collecting data and using consistent methodology that produces defensible results<sup>5</sup>.

## ANNUAL STATE LAND ACQUISITION COORDINATING FORUM

### Proposed 2013-2015 State Agency Acquisition Projects



The lands group hosted the fourth State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum on March 13, 2012. The forum is an opportunity for citizens, legislators, state and local planners, tribes, and others to learn about habitat and recreation lands that state agencies propose for state and federal funding in 2013-2015. Participating agencies presented maps and other information about planned projects and explained why the projects are priorities for the state. Attendees were encouraged to discuss the projects openly at the forum. The forum is informal, intended to generate questions and discussion to

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<sup>5</sup> The lands group discussed economic impact reports such as the [Outdoor Recreation Economy 2012 report](#), the 2010 report on the [Economic Benefits of the Washington Wildlife & Recreation Program](#), and a Western Governor's Association 2012 [Snapshot of the Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation](#).

help identify opportunities for coordination. In addition to proposed projects, the forum is an opportunity to discuss policy considerations and coordination with other state agencies.

In addition to the presentations about projects, this year The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land, and Capitol Land Trust discussed the important role that non-profits play as partners to state land acquisitions. The Department of Transportation presented information about where it needed to find wetland mitigation sites at that time, and the Department of Natural Resources described the Trust Land Transfer program and presented the legislatively approved trust land properties for transfer in the 2011-2013 biennium. The Department of Ecology presented federally funded projects, and the State Conservation Commission presented proposed farmland preservation projects. Stakeholders were invited, including legislators, agency planners, local government representatives, non-profit organizations, and tribal members. About 50 people attended.

## BIENNIAL STATE LAND ACQUISITION FORECAST REPORT

The lands group published the second biennial *State Land Acquisition Forecast Report* on its Web site in September 2012. The goal of the forecast is to provide information about the state land purchases and disposals that are being planned around the state. Providing project information early in the acquisition planning process will help citizens, legislators, and state agencies make informed decisions about state land acquisitions and encourage better coordination and communication among state agencies.

The report included maps and information for about 40 habitat and recreation land acquisition projects proposed by the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department of Natural Resources, and the State Parks and Recreation Commission for the 2011-2013 biennium. The projects in the report were unfunded at the time the report was published, and the information provided was based on best estimates at the time. The report includes proposed project maps, proposed costs, proposed number of acres, proposed funding sources, project descriptions, intended uses, significance, links to plans, partners, and legislative district. Tables provide quick access to regional information about proposed acquisition and disposal projects.

The report also included proposed farmland preservation projects for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program in the 2013-2015 biennium, the approved properties planned for transfer through the Department of Natural Resources' Trust Land Transfer Program in the 2011-2013 biennium, and the Department of Transportation's wetland mitigation program. The report and companion statewide map of proposed projects is available on the lands group Web site at [www.rco.wa.gov/boards/hrlcg.shtml](http://www.rco.wa.gov/boards/hrlcg.shtml).

## 2012 PROGRESS

The lands group is responsible for accomplishing 11 statutory tasks. In 2012, the Legislature amended the lands group statute to prioritize five of these tasks if funding for the lands group is scarce. The five prioritized tasks are:

Task 1 – Review agency land acquisition and disposal plans and policies to help ensure statewide coordination of habitat and recreation land acquisitions and disposals.

Task 2 – Produce an interagency, statewide biennial forecast of habitat and recreation land acquisition and disposal plans.

Task 3 – Establish procedures for publishing the biennial forecast of acquisition and disposal plans on Web sites or other centralized, easily accessible formats.

Task 4 – Develop and convene an annual forum for agencies to coordinate their near-term acquisition and disposal plans.

Task 5 – Develop an approach for monitoring the success of acquisitions.

To meet its statutory goals, the lands group created a process to improve the visibility and coordination of state land acquisitions and disposals. The process works over the biennial funding cycle and has the following components:

State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum	State Land Acquisition Forecast Report	State Land Acquisition Performance Monitoring Report
Brings stakeholders together to review state land acquisition proposals and discuss land acquisition policy	Gives information about the state land purchases and disposals that are being planned around the state	Shows whether state agencies achieved their initial acquisition project objectives
Hosted annually	Published biennially, at least six months before funding is approved by the Legislature	Published biennially, at the close of each biennium
Tasks 1 and 4	Tasks 2 and 3	Task 5

In 2012, the lands group completed tasks 1 through 4:

- Review agency land acquisition and disposal plans and policies to help ensure statewide coordination of habitat and recreation land acquisitions and disposals.
- Produce an interagency, statewide biennial forecast of habitat and recreation land acquisition and disposal plans.
- Establish procedures for publishing the biennial forecast of acquisition and disposal plans on Web sites or other centralized, easily accessible formats.
- Develop and convene an annual forum for agencies to coordinate their near-term acquisition and disposal plans.

It accomplished these tasks by hosting the State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum and publishing the *2012 State Land Acquisition Forecast Report*. The *Biennial State Land Acquisition Performance Monitoring Report* (Task 5) was not completed in 2012 because it is published biennially in odd years, at the close of each biennium.

## IS THE LANDS GROUP MAKING A DIFFERENCE?

State agencies purchase habitat and recreation lands to protect important state resources such as habitat for threatened and endangered species and to provide outdoor recreation opportunities. As population increases, there is greater need to preserve these resources for current and future generations. At the same time, population growth and declining revenues has led to an increased desire to find innovative ways to meet multiple state objectives on the same land, such as protecting habitat while encouraging agricultural productivity.

State agencies have had to become more strategic in planning for habitat and recreation land acquisitions during difficult economic times. With agency staff cuts and reductions in grant funding for land purchases, agencies must make careful decisions about which projects to pursue to meet their public mandates and how to better coordinate with other agencies on land transactions.

Similarly, with an increasing demand for public accountability, it is more important than ever to ensure that each project is a good investment of public resources. Open, visible state land acquisition processes help make strong public investments. As agencies work to protect natural resources under increased scrutiny, transparent land transactions help inform local and state decision makers.

Improving coordination – The annual State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum and the quarterly meetings make a difference by providing regular opportunities for inter-agency coordination of land acquisition projects to improve strategic planning. Learning about one another’s purchase plans helps agencies identify partnering opportunities and reduce duplicative efforts. Learning about one another’s acquisition processes helps produce best management practices for land purchases.

Addressing key policy issues – The annual forums make a difference by encouraging open discussion of key policy issues, such as funding for land maintenance, with citizens and state lawmakers. With an increased interest in issues related to public land conservation, the forum gives an opportunity for agencies to hear about the issues that are important to lawmakers and the public and for legislators and citizens to learn about projects in their areas and about state land purchasing practices.

Improving transparency – In addition to the annual forum, the lands group reports make a difference by giving timely information to citizens about land purchase plans in their areas. The *State Land Acquisition Forecast Report* shows maps and detailed information about proposed projects, such as project boundaries, intended uses, purchasing agency, cost, and number of acres. It rolls up the data by county and statewide to show the big picture of what the state is planning. Local and state planners say the report helps them make more informed decisions about land purchases.

## 2013 ACTION PLAN

In 2013, the lands group will complete Tasks 1, 4, and 5:

- Review agency land acquisition and disposal plans and policies to help ensure statewide coordination of habitat and recreation land acquisitions and disposals.

- Develop and convene an annual forum for agencies to coordinate their near-term acquisition and disposal plans.
- Develop an approach for monitoring the success of acquisitions.

The lands group will accomplish these tasks by hosting the State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum and publishing the *Biennial State Land Acquisition Performance Monitoring Report*. It will not produce the *State Land Acquisition Forecast Report* (Tasks 2 and 3) because that report is published biennially in even years, in advance of funding approval by the Legislature.

In addition to accomplishing statutory tasks, the lands group will continue to coordinate emerging policy issues relating to state land acquisitions. For example, the lands group will address questions such as “How much is enough land?” and “How will the land maintenance be funded?” It will explore options for a coordinated approach to addressing these kinds of questions, and for making the state’s approach to answering them clearer.

In 2013 the lands group will begin hosting coordination workshops for state land acquisition planners to discuss the details of planned projects. The workshops will focus on identifying partnership opportunities, reducing duplicative efforts, and identifying best management practices for land purchases.

## STATE LANDS INVENTORY UPDATE

If funding is approved, in 2013 the lands group will begin work to update the state lands inventory. RCO submitted a budget request on behalf of the lands group to update the inventory of state-owned habitat and recreation lands. The inventory will be GIS-based and Web-accessible. Legislators and others have requested a tool like this to give a statewide picture of what habitat and recreation land the state owns, including how much money has gone towards acquisitions in areas of the state. The tool will be useful for helping the Legislature and the public decide where investments in land should be directed. It also will help state land managing agencies prioritize future land purchases.

## NEXT STEPS

The lands group’s work will culminate in formal recommendations to the Legislature. In the meantime, the lands group progress, meeting and event information, and documents can be found at its Web site at [www.rco.wa.gov/rco/h&rlcg/default.htm](http://www.rco.wa.gov/rco/h&rlcg/default.htm).

## ATTACHMENT A: HABITAT AND RECREATION LANDS COORDINATING GROUP MEMBERS

December 2012

Affiliation / Organization	Members/Alternates
Washington State Legislature	Senator Linda Evans Parlette
Washington Recreation and Conservation Office	Kaleen Cottingham Alternate: Nona Snell Dominga Soliz
Washington Department of Natural Resources	Pene Speaks Alternate: Clay Sprague
Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission	Steve Hahn Alternate: Shannon Stevens
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife	Jennifer Quan Alternate: Paul Dahmer
Washington State Conservation Commission	Ron Shultz Alternate: Josh Giuntoli
Washington Department of Ecology	Chris Hempleman
Washington Department of Transportation	Paul Wagner
County Governments/Okanogan County	Andrew Lampe
City Government Park Planners/Washington Recreation and Park Association	Leslie Betlach Alternate: Shelley Marelli
Pacific Coast Joint Venture	Lora Leschner
The Nature Conservancy	Bill Robinson
Forest Products Industry, represented by a Washington Forest Protection Association member	Eric Beach
Puget Sound Partnership	Michael Grayum
Trust for Public Land	Mike Deller Alternate: Bill Clarke
Washington Association of Land Trusts	Leda Chahim Alternates: Gary Schalla and Joe Kane

## ATTACHMENT B: LEGISLATION

### REVISED CODE OF WASHINGTON 79A.25.260

#### **Habitat and recreation lands coordinating group — Members — Progress reports — Duties.**

(expires July 31, 2017.)

- (1) The habitat and recreation lands coordinating group is established. The group must include representatives from the office, the state parks and recreation commission, the department of natural resources, and the department of fish and wildlife. The members of the group must have subject matter expertise with the issues presented in this section. Representatives from appropriate stakeholder organizations and local government must also be considered for participation on the group, but may only be appointed or invited by the director.
- (2) To ensure timely completion of the duties assigned to the group, the director shall submit yearly progress reports to the office of financial management.
- (3) The group must:
  - a. Review agency land acquisition and disposal plans and policies to help ensure statewide coordination of habitat and recreation land acquisitions and disposals;
  - b. Produce an interagency, statewide biennial forecast of habitat and recreation land acquisition and disposal plans;
  - c. Establish procedures for publishing the biennial forecast of acquisition and disposal plans on web sites or other centralized, easily accessible formats;
  - d. Develop and convene an annual forum for agencies to coordinate their near-term acquisition and disposal plans;
  - e. Develop a recommended method for interagency geographic information system-based documentation of habitat and recreation lands in cooperation with other state agencies using geographic information systems;
  - f. Develop recommendations for standardization of acquisition and disposal recordkeeping, including identifying a preferred process for centralizing acquisition data;
  - g. Develop an approach for monitoring the success of acquisitions;
  - h. Identify and commence a dialogue with key state and federal partners to develop an inventory of potential public lands for transfer into habitat and recreation land management status; and
  - i. Review existing and proposed habitat conservation plans on a regular basis to foster statewide coordination and save costs.
- (4) If prioritization among the various requirements of subsection (3) of this section is necessary due to the availability of resources, the group shall prioritize implementation of subsection (3)(a) through (d) and (g) of this section.
- (5) The group shall revisit the planning requirements of relevant grant programs administered by the office to determine whether coordination of state agency habitat and recreation land acquisition and disposal could be improved by modifying those requirements.

- (6) The group must develop options for centralizing coordination of habitat and recreation land acquisition made with funds from federal grants. The advantages and drawbacks of the following options, at a minimum, must be developed:
  - a. Requiring that agencies provide early communication on the status of federal grant applications to the office, the office of financial management, or directly to the legislature;
  - b. Establishing a centralized pass-through agency for federal funds, where individual agencies would be the primary applicants.
- (7) This section expires July 31, 2017. Prior to January 1, 2017, the group shall make a formal recommendation to the board and the appropriate committees of the legislature as to whether the existence of the habitat and recreation lands coordinating group should be continued beyond July 31, 2017, and if so, whether any modifications to its enabling statute should be pursued.

[2012 c 128 § 1; 2007 c 247 § 1.]

Notes:

Finding – 2012 c 128: "The legislature finds that participation by the state's habitat and recreation land management agencies in the habitat and recreation lands coordinating group is an inherent part of transparent, efficient, and effective state habitat and recreation land management, and must be conducted within existing resources." [2012 c 128 § 2.]