
Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group

2017 Progress Report



Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group
Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office
P.O. Box 40917
Olympia, WA. 98504-0917

(360) 902-3000
TTD (360) 902-1996

www.rco.wa.gov



Background

In 2007, the Washington State Legislature created the Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group¹ (lands group) 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.

WHAT STATE LAWMAKERS ASKED STATE AGENCIES TO PROVIDE

In creating the lands group, state legislators are expecting that state agencies acquire habitat and recreation lands strategically and not just as opportunities arise. They are also expecting state agencies to talk to each other about land transactions on a regular basis, not duplicate roles, and maintain programs that have distinct purposes complementary to one another.

WHAT CITIZENS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ASKED STATE AGENCIES TO PROVIDE

A combination of state, federal, and nonprofit land buyers using different planning processes has made it difficult for citizens to know what recreation and conservation land purchases are being planned and occurring in their communities. Citizens and local governments want to know which purchasers are planning to buy recreation and conservation land in their communities. What land is planned for purchase? Why is the land being purchased? What are the longer-term priorities and how are they set? How can citizens get involved in the planning process?

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

The lands group process occurs on the biennial funding cycle and includes the following components:

- **Annual Coordinating Forum:** The Annual State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum brings together legislators, 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 state land purchases and disposals planned for the next biennium.
- **Biennial Performance Monitoring Report:** The *Biennial State Land Acquisition Performance Monitoring Report* shows whether state agencies achieved their initial acquisition project objectives.

¹Substitute Senate Bill 5236

The lands group membership includes representatives from the following state 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 local governments, the Legislature, and others including the Trust for Public Land, The Nature Conservancy, Washington Forest Protection Association, Pacific Coast Joint Venture, and Washington Association of Land Trusts (see Attachment A for a list of members). The Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) provides staff support and hosts the lands group 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 makes a difference in the following ways:

Improving coordination – The annual State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum and the quarterly meetings enable interagency coordination of land acquisition projects to improve strategic planning; help agencies identify partnering opportunities and reduce duplicative efforts; and help produce best management practices for land purchases. Another benefit is improving coordination of information between local governments and citizens in counties where acquisitions are proposed.

Addressing key policy issues – The annual forums encourage open discussion of key policy issues, such as funding for land maintenance, with citizens and state lawmakers. With an increased interest in 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 – The lands group reports give timely information to citizens about land purchase plans in their areas. The annual progress report (this document) is submitted on behalf of the group to satisfy the reporting requirement in the Revised Code of Washington 79A.25.260². 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

² Attachment B: Enabling Legislation

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.

2017 Progress on Statutory Tasks

The lands group is responsible for accomplishing 11 statutory tasks. In 2012, the Legislature amended the statute to prioritize five. The progress achieved for each of the five priority tasks is outlined below.

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

The lands group accomplished this through publication of the [2017-19 State Land Acquisition Forecast Report](#) in 2016 and with the annual coordinating forum on June 1, 2017.

TASK 2 | *Produce an interagency, statewide biennial forecast of habitat and recreation land acquisition and disposal plans.*

The lands group published the [2017-19 Biennial State Land Acquisition Forecast Report](#) on its Web site in May 2016. The forecast report provides information about the state land purchases that are being planned around the state. This early reporting process provides advance notification to stakeholders and the Legislature about planned purchases in their areas, meaningful opportunity to engage in the planning process, and complete and accessible information about proposed projects.

As mentioned in more detail below, the lands group was responsive to the Joint Legislative and Audit Committee's findings in 2015 that there needed to be a single, easily accessible source of information on land transactions that included information not previously collected by the lands group or other entity. New information fields were added to the 2017-19 Biennial State Land Acquisition Forecast Report on current use of the property, how the acquisition ties to the agency's larger strategic planning efforts, what are the project outcomes and the agency's current progress on achieving those outcomes, who are the partners, and what are future operation and maintenance costs of the acquisition.

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

The *State Land Acquisition Forecast Report* provides early notification about plans for land purchases by the state natural resource agencies. The report also gives a comprehensive look at what's being planned around the state, through county-wide, statewide, and project-specific maps and data. In preparing the 2016 report, RCO partnered with Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Natural Resources, and State Parks and Recreation Commission to compile and refine state land acquisition data. RCO packaged and submitted the *2017-19 State Land Acquisition Forecast Report* to the Legislature in May 2016. The forecast also was distributed to other interested parties.

TASK 4 | *Develop and convene an annual forum for agencies to coordinate their near-term acquisition and disposal plans.*

The lands group hosted the seventh annual State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum on June 1, 2017. This year the focus was on how well the agencies accomplished their acquisition goals proposed for the 2013-15 biennium. Participating agencies presented maps and information about their proposed projects, including specifically if the project was implemented or not. A roundtable discussion offered the opportunity to identify efforts, opportunities, and issues for improving transparency and coordination of state land acquisitions. Attendees were encouraged to discuss the projects openly at the forum. The forum is intended to generate questions and discussion about policy and coordination with other state agencies.

TASK 5 | *Develop an approach for monitoring the success of acquisitions.*

The fourth *Biennial State Land Acquisition Performance Monitoring Report* will be released in December 2017. This report monitors the success of state habitat and recreation land acquisitions by examining whether state agencies achieved their acquisition objectives. Data from the report can be used to identify strengths and weaknesses in state acquisition processes and inform decisions made by the Legislature, state agencies, local governments, and others.

Other Activities that Support the Lands Group

LEGISLATIVE ACTION RELATED TO THE LANDS GROUP

Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee Preliminary Report: Measuring Outcomes of Land Acquisitions and Regulations (December 2017). In this study, the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee concluded that regulations and acquisitions protect habitat in different ways and that outcome information can be improved through statutory direction, along with agency planning and investment for monitoring. The recommendations from the report include the following:

- The Office of Financial Management and the Recreation and Conservation Office should develop and submit a joint plan to the Legislature detailing the actions, costs, and timelines needed to comply with statutes that direct them to measure performance of land acquisitions and related grant programs.
- If the Legislature wants reliable information about the outcomes of regulatory programs implemented at the local level, it should consider requiring state agencies to work with local governments to develop outcome-focused performance measures.
- Department of Fish and Wildlife, the State Parks and Recreation Commission, and the Department of Natural Resources should provide the Legislature with a plan detailing the resources necessary to report stewardship needs.

The state agencies concur with the Auditor's recommendations and will begin working on developing the requested plans in 2018.

Additionally in the JLARC report is a list of general questions that legislators could ask agencies about proposed land acquisitions intended to protect and conserve habitat:

1. Does the acquisition have a clearly stated goal?
2. What species will the acquisition protect and what are its habitat requirements?
3. To what degree are these species and habitat types already protected?
4. What is the level of threat to the species/habitat and to what degree will acquisition offset those threats?
5. How likely is the acquisition to provide continued protection for the species/habitat in the future?
6. Does the proposed acquisition have a plan that includes monitoring and a mechanism to adjust management if goals are not being met?

Most of these questions are already asked and answered in the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program grant application and then used by RCO's grant evaluation committees when individual projects are evaluated and ranked. We recognize that this information tends to be buried in the application text and may be difficult to pull out as answers to these individual questions. To that end, RCO will recommend that the lands group modify its biennial forecast report to explicitly address these questions. In the forecast report information relating to each of the questions could be included for each of the proposed projects. We believe that this would enhance the information provided to the legislature in the forecast report.

Strategy for State Recreation and Conservation Land Acquisition and Development (December 2017).

In 2015, the Washington State Legislature directed the Recreation and Conservation Office to review the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program.³ One of the recommendations of the review was for state agencies to develop a coordinated, statewide, conservation and outdoor recreation strategy that outlines state agency priorities for acquisitions and development. The lands group worked with the agencies to develop the [Strategy for State Recreation and Conservation Land Acquisition and Development](#).

The state agencies primarily responsible for the acquisition and development of state lands for habitat conservation and outdoor recreation purposes are the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission (State Parks), Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Each of these agencies invests a significant amount of time and effort to look at the future and prioritize their portfolios of land and facilities to achieve their statutory missions. This plan consolidates the existing individual agency plans into a unified state strategy on land acquisition and development.

³Washington Laws 2015 3rd Special Session PV C 3 § 3163

The plan is provided on the [lands group web page](#), as well as part of the [State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan web site](#) (under the 'Specific Plans' tab at the top of the page). It is the intent of the lands group to facilitate an update to this strategy every 6 years.

2018 Action Plan

- Host 9th Annual State Land Acquisition Coordinating Forum
- Publish *Biennial State Land Acquisition Forecast Report*
- Assist OFM and RCO develop a plan for measuring outcomes of habitat acquisition projects as directed by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee
- Modify the 2018 forecast report to include the questions proposed by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee

Attachment A | Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group

As of December 2016

Affiliation / Organization	Member / Alternate
City Government Park Planners / Washington Recreation and Park Association	Leslie Betlach Alternate: Shelley Marelli
County Governments / Douglas County	Commissioner Steve Jenkins
Forest Products Industry / Washington Forest Protection Association Member	Rick Schmel
Pacific Coast Joint Venture	Lora Leschner
Puget Sound Partnership	Jeff Parsons
The Nature Conservancy	Tom Bugert
Trust for Public Land	Bill Clarke
Washington Association of Land Trusts	Hannah Clark Alternates: Gary Schalla, Joe Kane
Washington Department of Ecology	Heather Kapust
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife	Cynthia Wilkerson Alternates: Wendy Connally
Washington Department of Natural Resources	John Gamon
Washington Department of Transportation	Paul Wagner
Washington Recreation and Conservation Office	Kaleen Cottingham Alternate: Wendy Brown
Washington State Conservation Commission	Ron Shultz Alternate: Josh Giuntoli
Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission	Steve Hahn Alternate: Shannon Stevens

Attachment B | Enabling 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, 2027. Prior to January 1, 2027, 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, 2027, 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.]