

Public comments requested by March 14, 2025

## **Proposed Changes to Eligibility Requirements in the Urban Wildlife Habitat Category Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program**

### **Background**

In 2019, the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board changed the requirements for where a project must be located to be eligible for funding in the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program's Urban Wildlife Habitat Category. The change aimed to allow more areas to be eligible to better preserve habitat in rapidly urbanizing areas of the state.

The current policy is as follows:

To be eligible in this category, the land must be in one of the following areas:

- Within five miles of the designated urban growth area of a city or town with a population of five thousand or more. *(No change proposed)*
- Within five miles of a designated urban cluster with a population of five thousand or more. *(Change proposed)*
- Within five miles of an adopted urban growth boundary in a county that has a population density of 250 people per square mile or greater. *(No change proposed)*

### **Census Bureau's New Urban Areas Definition**

In 2020, the Census Bureau changed its definition of urban areas by doing the following:

- Removing distinct classifications of urban areas, including urban clusters.
- Increasing the size of the population needed to qualify from 2,500 to five thousand.
- Adding housing unit density as a qualifier.

Now, "urban areas" are defined as areas with at least five thousand people or a housing unit density of two thousand.

## Urban Wildlife Habitat Location Eligibility Policy

Because of the bureau's changes, the board must update its eligibility requirements. The goals of this update are the following:

- Align with the Census Bureau's new definition.
- Ensure eligibility is maintained for those communities that met the 2019 board-adopted definition.
- Address the goals and priorities of the board, including the following:
  - Maintain focus on protecting functioning native habitat in urbanizing areas by increasing project eligibility.
  - Increase the number of applications and funded projects from local organizations.

RCO staff presented this issue and two proposed resolutions to the board on January 29, 2025. After discussion and an opportunity for the public to comment, the board directed staff to recommend a solution to align eligibility with the Census Bureau's new definition and seek public comment.

### Proposed Solution

Staff recommends revising the policy to be the following:

To be eligible in this category, the land must be in one of the following areas:

- Within five miles of the designated urban growth area of a city or town with a population of five thousand or more. (*Unchanged*)
- Within five miles of a U.S. Census Bureau designated urban area. (*New*)
- Within five miles of an adopted urban growth boundary in a county with 250 people per square mile or greater. (*Unchanged*)

### Additional Information

If the Census Bureau's full definition (population and housing units) is used in this program, more communities would be eligible as there are communities that are only eligible with the use of housing units. Including housing units creates less variability in program eligibility because the number of units does not change as often as population levels. For instance, a population can change significantly with the season or long-term vacation rentals.

Additional information concerning this topic can be found in the [January 2025 meeting materials](#).

## How to Comment

The Recreation and Conservation Office is requesting public comment on the proposed revision to the Urban Wildlife Habitat Category Location Eligibility Policy.

Comments must be submitted before 11:59 p.m., March 14, 2025 by filling out this [form](#).

## Next Steps

After receiving public comment, staff will make a recommendation to the board at its [April 2025 meeting](#). The updated criterion will be used in 2026.

## Questions

Email [Julia McNamara](#), board liaison, 360-902-2956, Washington Relay for the hearing impaired, dial 711