

Conservation Report
Winter 2004
by Mike Marsh, WNPS Conservation Committee

This will be the first of a regular series of articles about the Washington Native Plant Society's role in conserving native plants. Please send me information for this column from your chapter. Mary Fries has served as Conservation Chair for the South Sound Chapter since the post was created. She wrote to me last summer, describing the activities and methods used by some past State Conservation Chairs. Their activities included meeting with Chapter Conservation Chairs to discuss ways that they and the State Committee could cooperate, soliciting reports from the chapters on their activities, and inviting them to attend State Board meetings. At least one of the State Chairs produced a conservation newsletter. Mary suggests that we increase our efforts to reach a wider public via the news media as well as by providing speakers to address other organizations.

At the June 28 Board meeting, we decided to concentrate the Society's conservation efforts on the Garry oak (*Quercus garryana*, also called Oregon white oak) woodland and shrub steppe community types, and on the challenging issue of invasive plants. An article in the Fall 2003 issue of *Douglasia*, "Conserving Native Plants," set out reasons for choosing these topics.

Kittitas Valley Wind Power

Construction of a wind farm on ridges flanking the upper canyon of the Yakima River between Cle Elum and Ellensburg is proposed by Sagebrush Power Partners L. L. C. The proposal is being reviewed by Washington's Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council. Tom Cottrell of the Central Washington University faculty has been looking into the floristics of the site and of the alignments for roads serving the facility, facts which will guide our decision on whether to comment. Tom notes that the siting locations are also places with good "territorial views" and that many of these sites, if they do not become wind farms, will eventually be sub-divided for housing! A draft environmental impact statement has recently been issued, and public comments are due by January 20, 2004, before the probable publication date of this report. While this siting application is primarily a local issue, the potential for future expansion of wind-power farms in Washington makes it important for us to develop a unified and forward-looking approach as we work to protect the shrub-steppe habitat, where wind farms are often located.

Gold Mine on the Tolt

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Seattle Public Utilities department received a proposal this year to open two old gold mines, one of which lies in the Tolt River Watershed above the reservoir providing part of Seattle's water supply. In the proposal, at least part of the ore was to be extracted by helicopter, and a helicopter landing pad was proposed near a wetland in which Laura Potash and other botanists had located a population of *Platanthera chorisiana*, a State-listed "threatened" species. I talked with Laura, who visited the site. The known population of *P. chorisiana* was probably far enough from the proposed work sites that it would not be directly endangered, but import of invasive weed propagules seemed to be a possible detrimental consequence. We wrote comments responding to a USFS scoping letter, and no further action by

the intending mining company has been reported.

Dosewallips Road

Wendy McClure and Mary Fries have been following U.S. Forest Service planning with respect to a road washout on the Dosewallips River about a mile below Elkhorn Campground. Two popular campgrounds lie beyond the washout, but salmon were observed nesting in the washout gravel where the road would have been rebuilt. A survey was made for a new road on the mountainside above the river. Tim McNulty, President of Olympic Park Associates, recently walked the surveyed route (whether the first or the second survey is unclear), and wrote to Helen Engle:

“It traverses an exquisite, low-elevation old-growth forest ribboned with seasonal streams... John (Woolley, of Olympic Forest Coalition) and I measured Douglas-firs larger than six feet in diameter along the flag line, a spectacular size for the relatively dry slopes of the east Olympics. The biggest trees showed burn scars from ancient fires. There are also a number of large western red cedar (up to four feet in diameter) and understory western hemlock, suggesting a long fire-free period. On an earlier trip, John counted 167 trees larger than 3 feet in diameter within 30 feet either side of the center line. The forest stand is open, easily traversed, with vine maple common in the understory and a thick carpet of sword fern and Oregon grape. Numerous snags, down logs and a multistoried canopy attest to productive old-growth habitat....In its earlier EA, Olympic National Forest dismissed the bypass option as unfeasible siting slope instability, sedimentation of salmon streams, and impacts on wildlife.” [See www.drizzle.com/~rdpayne/opa.html for more information and photographs.]

If the road is not rebuilt, many older people and others unable to walk a couple of miles to the now isolated Elkhorn campground will be unable to enjoy the beauty of that area, and hikers who formerly began hikes in the Olympics from those campgrounds will have to trek an extra 6 miles to reach those trails. Would the environmental damage caused by rebuilding the new road be worth the pleasure and inspiration that many campers will get from visiting those campgrounds, or could a new trail traversing the proposed road alignment (and saving those trees and that scenery) become a welcome addition to the wonderful trails in the Olympics?

Ft. Lewis - Cross-Base Highway

In November, I wrote a comment regarding the proposed Cross-Base Highway on Fort Lewis. While local in its immediate impact, several issues of concern to us statewide are involved, including damage to one of our special emphasis community types, the Garry oak woodland, fragmentation of habitat, the very inadequate proposal for mitigation, and the potential for the new highway to encourage growth in South Pierce County. The preferred route for the four-lane highway would isolate Garry oak woodland and mixed Garry oak/ponderosa pine forest from similar habitat south of the proposed highway. A western gray squirrel population inhabits the woodland. One item of concern about the final EIS was the contractor's arbitrary decision to classify grassland as nonnative if less than 10% native grass cover was present. While much of the area of Fort Lewis possesses significant numbers of prairie forb species, only 9 acres of grassland met this criterion because the prairie grass component was too sparse.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency prepared a comment classifying the Final EIS as inadequate, and a meeting was arranged for local groups to brief the Regional Administrator. Steve Erickson represented the Washington Native Plant Society at this meeting. Steve, together with representatives of Tahoma Audubon and the Woodbrook Hunt Club, were successful in convincing the Regional Administrator that this road is a bad idea. Thanks to all who took part in preparing our comments and representing our position.

Management of West Side State Trust Forest Lands

In November, the Washington Department of Natural Resources issued a draft EIS for “Sustainable Forest Management of State Trust Lands in Western Washington.” The plan complies with statute by laying out proposed alternative plans for managing forests for the next decade. It uses computer models to present the resulting changes in State Trust forests over the next 60 years if each alternative were followed. None of the six alternatives has been officially represented as the Preferred Alternative. The first alternative retains the current management plan, which approves conventional logging techniques with retention of legacy trees when a regeneration harvest (modified clear cut) is performed, maintaining no-cut riparian zones in a 100-foot or greater strip along each side of streams, and no-harvest zones in two categories of spotted owl habitat—owl circles and owl roosting, foraging and dispersal zones. Harvest is also precluded in 2,000 acres of old growth forest in stands of 80 acres or more.

Nearly one half of all the volume of lumber in the State Trust lands reside in the lands described above which are currently off limits to commercial logging. Every alternative except for Alternative 1 proposes some level of logging in riparian areas and in owl habitats. The sixth alternative is of particular interest. It would use a modification of methods outlined in a modeling study by Andrew Carey of the U.S. Forest Service’s Pacific Northwest Research Station. His work proposes variable patches of thinning, retention of large woody debris, and other culture methods combined with long rotations of 70 and 130 years. Transformed into DNR language, the 130-year rotation, and the proposal to increase the proportion of the forest that has attained mature (that is, managed old-growth) status to 30% or more from the current 4%, have vanished.

Nearly all of those commenting at a public meeting asked that DNR seek “green forest” certification from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Arguments raised include the fact that consumers look for environmentally sustainable products, that FSC tracks wood from its source in the forest to the retail store, that several other states have obtained or are working to obtain forest product certification from FSC, that several major building supply retailers have agreed to sell only FSC labeled lumber, and the probability that under FSC even a reduced harvest rate would yield fiscal benefits to Trustees comparable or greater than would be yielded under current management principles.

With almost equal frequency, commenters asked DNR to go back to their model and include the costs, both environmental and fiscal, of building all the roads that would be needed to support timber harvests at the expanded rates proposed in the different alternatives. Some alternatives nearly double the anticipated harvest rate, yet the agency writes: “Over the course of the time period covered by the modeling, no significant net changes to roaded area or practices related to

road location or construction are anticipated under any of the Alternatives beyond existing conditions . . .”

In a written comment, WNPS asked DNR to include seven measures in their management plan:

1. Reduce the number of times a forest stand is disturbed during its growth cycle, and the level of disturbance.
2. Plan stand placement and development so that migration and dispersal of native plants and other organisms from older to younger stands can readily occur.
3. Minimize harmful edge effects to older forest stands.
4. Conduct tests of methods to encourage early development of complex habitat and increase of within-stand diversity in young forest stands.
5. Minimize entry of exotic plants to forest lands.
6. Continue to protect riparian habitat and special owl habitat.
7. Reduce or eliminate fertilizer application to forest stands, to discourage invasives and protect native biodiversity.

We asked that the Department of Natural Resources publish information about the probable impacts, fiscal and environmental, of the necessary road construction and of risks from mass wasting on unstable slopes under the different alternatives proposed. We also asked that a period for public comment be announced after publication of the revised or final Environmental Impact Statement, and we urged the Department of Natural Resources to seek and obtain green forest certification.

Rule changes for Grazing Leases

Newly proposed changes in rules for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management would make it easier for lessees to continue to follow harmful practices on leased federal grazing lands and give them rights over those lands, such as purchasing water rights and ownership of any “improvements” such as fencing and stock tanks, which would virtually amount to private ownership of the lands. An article by Earth Justice describes the changes. See <http://www.earthjustice.org/news/display.html?ID=742>.

The Federal Register article proclaiming them is at <http://www.blm.gov/nhp/news/regulatory/4100-Proposed/4100p.html>

An informative book, “Welfare Ranching” may be found on the Web at <http://www.sw-center.org/swcbd/events/welfare-ranching.html>

Shrub-steppe Symposium

Members of Eastern Washington chapters have been active with weed control and grazing management issues and with the effects of fire. A nagging issue for us is the set of practices by Washington Department of Natural Resources, which treats native shrub-steppe vegetation as worthless, with the result that choice steppe stands are leased or sold for conversion to orchards or vineyards.

I attended a meeting of the Shrub-Steppe Working Group in November (see report in this issue). The Group plans a conference on shrub-steppe issues, to be held in conjunction with the Northwest Scientific Association meeting in Ellensburg March 24-27.