

https://www.dailyrecordnews.com/news/fish-and-wildlife-reps-gather-input-on-l-t-murray-wildlife-area-plan/article_ea063922-1158-11ee-b175-c335a3a9e8fa.html

Fish and Wildlife reps gather input on L.T. Murray Wildlife Area plan

RODNEY HARWOOD staff writer

Jun 24, 2023



Bill Essman with the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club talks over options with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife representatives during Wednesday's open house discussions on L.T. Murray Wildlife management.

Rodney Harwood/Daily Record

The L.T. Murray Wildlife area is a 119,395-acre biologically diverse, range of elevations with a variety of precipitation patterns in Kittitas County. It is comprised of five distinct units north and south of Interstate 90 from Easton nearly to Vantage, west of the Columbia River.

On Wednesday, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife representatives met with Kittitas County citizens to discuss its draft management plan for the L.T. Murray Wildlife Area and its preservation its shrubsteppe hillsides, conifer forests, meadows and water corridors.

The wildlife area provides critical winter range for deer and elk and big horn sheep habitat, and supports several rare, endangered, and culturally significant plants and animals.

"The biggest thing we're trying to accomplish tonight is making sure the local community has the opportunity to talk Fish and Wildlife personnel that have a first-hand knowledge in writing and developing the new management plan for L.T. Murray Wildlife Area," said Hannah Bates, WDFW Region 3 Land Operations Manager.

"What we want to find out is what are the things they want the most? What are the things they want to see different? We want to hear their comments and include their input."

The L.T. Murray Wildlife Area includes five wildlife area units and is managed to protect a diverse array of habitats and species, with portions of the Yakima River and its tributaries, including the Teanaway River, and Manastash, Taneum, and Cabin creeks.

To the east, Skookumchuck, Quilomene, and Whiskey Dick creeks flow through the wildlife area to join the Columbia River.

The wildlife area management is designed to protect critical winter range for deer and elk, as well as provide and protect upland game bird habitat. Right now, approximately 2,000 head of elk are fed on the wildlife area each winter to minimize damage damage to nearby agriculture lands.

Forrest improvement projects are currently underway, Bates said. Recent conservation efforts are returning federally listed salmon and steelhead to the Manatash and Taneum.

"What's nice about the plan is that every two years we're able to hold these and we basically provide the public with our performance measures, everything we were able to accomplish," Bates said. "So, tonight is going to help us gauge our successes and look at the things we need to work on."

Some of the work accomplished includes Bull trout and salmon recovery efforts that are ongoing on the L.T. Murray, Yakima River and Teanaway Valley units.

Featured conservation success stories include the acquisition of land now designated as the Teanaway Valley unit, the restoration of the North fork of Manastash Creek, new trail head kiosks, and removal of derelict fencing.

The success of the projects was due to the participation and commitment of the following partners: Yakama Nation Fisheries, Mid-Columbia Fisheries, Kittitas County, the Department of Ecology, Washington State Parks, the Department of Natural Resources, the Trust for Public Lands, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mountain to Sound Greenway Trust, the Boy Scouts of America, Conservation Northwest, Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, the Mule Deer Foundation, Washington Conservation Corps, Pheasants Forever, Ruffed Grouse Society, Kittitas County Stream and Field Club, Backcountry Horsemen, local volunteers and Master Hunters.

Bill and Deborah Essman have been active in the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club, which has been active since 1919. Bill Essman was part of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife committee and believes the management is critical to preservation in Kittitas County.

"These are our public lands. Sometimes its easier for the public to sit home and complain when things don't go their way. But tonight is an opportunity to have your voice heard," he said. "I think they pay attention to what we say.

"Our population in the state of Washington is growing so fast. A brand-new group of people have discovered Kittitas County. We have one of the highest percentages of public land in the state. We need to manage what we have for future generations."

Public recreation opportunities in the wildlife area include hunting, camping, wildlife viewing, fishing, target shooting, motorized recreation on the Green Dot system, horseback riding, mountain biking and hiking.

"I think its really important that the public be involved in decisions about public lands," said Deborah Essman, who is a past President of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club. "L.T. Murray is a huge wildlife area. We're making sure that the wildlife is managed well, because hunting and fishing is really big here."

The area is characterized as the Columbia Plateau. Localized differences in elevation and precipitation result in a diverse array of habitats across the wildlife area, including aspen stands and old-growth forests, shrubsteppe, wetlands, cliffs, riparian areas, meadows, and aquatic habitats make it an interesting challenge.

Deborah Essman is quick to point out that the habitat is fragile despite having an outward appearance of a rugged terrain.

"People think wildfires burning the sage brush isn't important but it's really terrible," said Essman, who sits on the Teanaway Forrest Advisory Committee. "Sagebrush is a hugely important habitat for mule deer, for migrating birds that come here.

"We've got sagebrush sparrows, sage thrashers, all these different birds who depend on the sagebrush. So, it's a very important habitat and it's important it is maintained.

“So we welcome the opportunity for our feedback that gives us a voice in how it's maintained.”

WDFW manages nearly one million acres of land, divided into 33 wildlife areas. These areas attract millions of visitors who hunt, fish and observe the wildlife in their natural environments, according to the website.

Each area is guided by a management plan to address wildlife species, habitats and public recreation.

Rodney Harwood