Public comment sought on proposed land exchange between WDFW and WDNR

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : November 19, 2009 at 5:37 am

OLYMPIA - The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) invites public comment through Dec. 16 on a proposal to exchange additional land in eastern Washington with the Washington Department of Natural Resources (WDNR).

In the second phase of a major land exchange proposed by the two agencies, WDFW would acquire approximately 25,849 acres of shrub-steppe and lower-elevation forest habitats, while WDNR would acquire approximately 12,424 acres of higher elevation forest habitat.

The proposed exchange would affect properties in Kittitas, Okanogan, Klickitat, Yakima, Asotin and Chelan counties.

"This proposal continues our work with WDNR to more efficiently and effectively manage lands for wildlife that have been fragmented for more than a century," said Jennifer Quan, WDFW lands division manager.

WDFW and other agencies involved in the proposed land exchange are accepting comments on a joint Environmental Assessment document that addresses both state and federal regulatory requirements.

Because the proposed land exchange is administrative in nature, WDFW has proposed a determination of non-significance (DNS) in the Environmental Assessment under provisions of State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA).

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service, which provided funding for some of the lands involved in the exchange, are also accepting public comments on the proposed action under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

A copy of the joint Environmental Assessment, which includes a description and maps of the proposed land exchange, is available on the WDFW website at http://wdfw.wa.gov/hab/sepa/sepa.htm . Comments on the document can made through Dec. 16 on that webpage, by FAX (360-902-2946), or by postal mail to WDFW SEPA Desk, 600 Capitol Way N., Olympia, WA 98501-1091.

In the first phase of the land exchange, finalized in August, WDFW acquired 9,000 acres and WDNR acquired 5,100 acres.

Quan said much of the public land owned by the state in eastern Washington is arranged in a checkerboard pattern, due to the way lands were distributed after statehood in 1889. That left wildlife habitat fragmented, increasing both the cost and the difficulty of effectively managing those lands over the long term.

In one large area of central Washington, WDNR and WDFW own or manage every other square mile across a 170,000-acre landscape with different management goals and legal mandates. Exchanging lands would allow each agency to better address its specific management goals without reducing the total amount of public land available for wildlife or recreation, Quan said.

The primary benefits of the exchange would:

Protect and enhance habitat for big-game species (e.g. elk, mule deer, bighorn sheep),

shrub-steppe species (e.g. sage grouse, sage thrasher, sage sparrow, Brewer's sparrow), and forest species (e.g. goshawk, pileated woodpecker, white headed woodpecker, forest grouse).

Maintain public access and recreation on public lands.

Generate revenue for WDNR trust beneficiaries such as public schools.