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AN OPPORTUNITY FOR TRANSPORTATION STREAMLINING: REGIONAL PLANNING AND HABITAT CONSERVATION PLANS (HCPs) IN PUGET SOUND, WASHINGTON

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Abstract

Over the past decade, western Washington has experienced rapid growth in population and development. Recently, the listing of a variety of salmonid fish species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) has heightened the need to integrate the needs of listed species and people, as continued growth is predicted for the area. Currently, transportation infrastructure projects are reviewed for compliance with the ESA and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) on a project-by-project basis. Considering the complexity and speed of which urbanization is occurring in western Washington, this approach presents multiple problems, including: missed opportunities for minimizing impacts, inadequately analyzed indirect and cumulative effects/impacts, significant permitting delays, and uncoordinated review and conservation.

The traditional project review/permit acquisition processes is not well suited for dealing with ESA-listed species in quickly urbanizing environments. Without an adequate mechanism for integrating land-use planning and ESA concerns, future actions could contribute to the continued degradation of ecosystems upon which listed species depend, and may encounter permitting delays.

Our paper presents a recommended approach to better integrate land-use planning and ESA concerns. Our recommendation is that those local jurisdictions with the greatest juxtaposition of transportation infrastructure projects and occurrence of listed species develop regional planning processes for ESA compliance. These processes would combine the state's Growth Management Act and ESA requirements, culminating in the implementation of multi-species Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) on a city/county basis. This would provide increased certainty to transportation planners and developers in understanding the constraints, opportunities, and conservation measures necessary to adequately conserve listed species.

We discuss the expected outcomes, benefits, disadvantages and assumptions behind such an approach. We provide examples of similar efforts that have involved planning for transportation infrastructure and address the cost and level of effort needed to implement multi-species regional HCPs. We also describe how delivery of transportation projects may be streamlined with this approach.

Biographical Sketch: Emily J. Teachout is a fish and wildlife biologist for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Western Washington Fish and Wildlife Office, in Lacey, Washington. For the past four years, Emily has served as transportation liaison dedicated to the coordination and review of transportation projects and policies. She works closely with staff from the Washington State Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration, and local jurisdictions proposing transportation improvements. Her work encompasses NEPA review of large-scale projects, ESA consultation, participation in streamlining initiatives, and guidance development. Prior to her current position, Emily was a wetland specialist with the Washington Department of Ecology, private consultant, and itinerant field biologist. Emily holds a bachelor's of science degree in ecology from The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington.