



King County

Water and Land Resources Division

Department of Natural Resources and Parks

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Cedar River Council DRAFT Meeting Notes

February 23, 2021 – 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm (scheduled)
Meeting/Video Conference Call via Zoom (King County account)

I) Call to Order / Welcome

Chair Max Prinsen called the meeting to order at 6:35 pm. Nathan Brown, King County staff for the CRC, reviewed the agenda. Mr. Prinsen noted that tonight's SPU presentation was arranged in response to a citizen's request for more information to be reported about the Cedar River watershed.

II) General CRC Announcements / Information (Open to All):

Frank Urabeck spoke on his response to a recent op-ed piece by John Lombard in the *Seattle Times*. The piece argued that hatcheries are not an important aspect of salmon recovery; Mr. Urabeck disagreed, and will email his response for CRC review. This will be discussed further later in the meeting.

III) Upland Forest Thinning in Cedar River Municipal Watershed – Rolf Gersonde, SPU Ecologist/Silviculturist

A) Presentation

Amy LaBarge introduced Mr. Gersonde, who has worked with Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) for many years on forest management and habitat restoration in the Cedar River watershed, and in implementation of SPU's Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the watershed. Mr. Gersonde's presentation focused on the what, why, and how of SPU's management practice of forest thinning.

The Cedar River municipal watershed has a long history of land use, much of it harvested over the last century. Sometimes thousands of acres at a time were cleared, resulting in a vast landscape change. Thus, reforestation was initiated. A forest, after a major disturbance, typically undergoes several phases: stand initiation, stem exclusion, understory reinitiation, and old growth. This is typical for Pacific Northwest forests.

SPU's HCP for the watershed was enacted in 2000. This declared the area an ecological preserve and protected it from land use development, land use change, and commercial forestry. Mr. Gersonde described the main focuses of the plan as "Forests, Fish, and Flows." It primarily manages the water supply for Seattle and surrounding municipal areas and habitats. The upland forest restoration program is part of the HCP, to develop old forest habitat landscape and increase biodiversity over a span of hundreds of years. Species diversity is also encouraged by thinning.

Mr. Gersonde described two methods of thinning used:

- **Upland Ecological Thinning:** This is like commercial thinning but can have more complex patterns. Largest trees in a stand are left behind, isolating the crown. This thins the smaller-diameter trees first to give larger trees more growth space. It allows for a more structurally diverse forest with a shrubby understory and a second layer of canopy grown from the bottom up. Canopy gaps are also created, from ¼ acre to a full acre in size, to open the forest to light for some species and develop a richer understory for wildlife habitat.
- **Individual Tree Release:** Trees are selected to promote old growth, and close "competitors" are thinned to give them room to grow. It allows review of other management objectives, such as laying down dead trees to create covered migration paths for amphibian life.

Of 15,000 acres of old growth forest managed by SPU, 13,800 acres of it are thinned; total forest acreage managed by SPU is 88,000 acres. SPU's commitment is to steward this public land: to develop and protect forested lands, provide for animal species, and promote healthy landscape habitat and biodiversity.

B) CRC Member & Public Comment / Q & A

- **Q:** Is revenue developed from this work and how does it relate to the timber take from tribes?
A: A relatively small amount of revenue is used to offset cost of the HCP. It is not commercial forestry.

- **Q:** Do you have a target date where thinning will not be needed?
A: The aim is long-term forest development; some parts of the watershed will take 150 years to mature into old growth. It's hard to speculate if this work will never be needed.
- **Q:** Open canopy has a big impact on food supply for deer/elk. How've they been doing in last 10-15 years?
A: The population is about ¼ of what it used to be, but more in balance with what the habitat can provide for.
- **Q:** Animal habitat is more of an incidental objective of the HCP, not a main goal?
A: Our intent is to provide for animals that thrive on old growth habitat. Neighboring forests are addressing young forest habitat needs more directly. The gist of the HCP is to provide regulatory certainty for water supply management, and secondly provide habitat for 83 mostly aquatic/amphibious species associated with old forest habitat. Some native game species are not covered under the HCP. We work with tribal partners and other stakeholders to ensure the HCP incorporates a range of objectives. There is no public hunting in the watershed, but the Muckleshoots have a special agreement with the City of Seattle to allow some hunting.
- **Q:** What effect will thinning have on fire risk?
A: Wildfire risk has been looked at for a long time. SPU is not currently thinning to reduce fuels to mitigate fire hazards. West Cascades forests are fuel-heavy with a lot of biomass and grow back quickly. Science does not support fuel management to reduce wildfire risk in our type of forests. These are not fire hazard treatments, but for habitat development and forest resilience.
- **Q:** Climate change has caused lower snowpack levels. Has anything like this been seen in this area?
A: While the watershed has seen effects of climate change, the change referred to here applies more to what is seen in Alaska, where there is a wide die-off of yellow cedar due to a lack of snow cover leaving root systems unprotected. But our region is likely to see climate change impacts as snowpack levels decrease.
- **Q:** What is the current policy on wildfires?
A: The policy is to put fires out and not let them grow beyond a few acres. Fire can have detrimental effects on water supply. The policy is to keep such conditions out, especially human-caused ignitions. SPU also has an effective strike team to put out fires.
- **Q:** Have any changes in hydrological impacts due to canopy changes been seen since 2000?
A: A maturing forest uses less water than younger forests. It is expected that as the forest matures, an improvement in hydrology will be seen.

Mr. Gersonde invited those interested in the forest management plan to contact him or Ms. LaBarge to conduct a public stakeholder tour of the watershed, once the COVID-19 pandemic is no longer a concern.

IV) CRC Updates (As Needed)

- **Lakeside Industries Asphalt Plant:** Steve Hiester said to his knowledge, this is still in permit review process.
- **WRIA 8:** There were no updates.
- **Fish Habitat Conservation/Restoration (Sockeye):** Mr. Urabeck spoke on his planned response to an anti-hatchery editorial in the *Seattle Times* by John Lombard. Mr. Urabeck counters that both hatcheries and habitat protection are needed to help sockeye. Larry Phillips observed the editorial highlights to the public the urgent need for action. He and Mr. Urabeck agreed on promoting tagging and transporting fish from the problematic shallow, warmer waters of the Ship Canal to cooler water two months out of the year to buy time on a short-term basis. Mr. Urabeck suggested talks with the tribes and US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the latter of whom manages the Ballard Locks and needs to be involved in such action. He recommended inviting USACE to speak on the Locks and the Canal to the CRC. He stressed this sockeye run can't wait five years for studies to be completed without proactive behavior in the meantime. Mr. Prinsen agreed, suggesting he and Mr. Urabeck and Mr. Phillips draft a letter for CRC review soon. Tom Allyn agreed transporting fish from the Locks should be a top priority, and several CRC members agreed delayed hatchery release of fish as more mature smolts should also be pursued.

Consensus favored emphasizing pursuit of two or three specific actions in a letter. Mr. Phillips proposed a letter to WRIA 8 asking their support for this approach. Jason Mulvihill-Kuntz of WRIA 8 said focus should be on areas where multiple species can be helped and it would be a big, but needed, lift to have as many partners as possible involved. He added that WRIA 8's Salmon Recovery Council (SRC) would welcome a letter from the CRC as a chance to discuss this further, but he couldn't guarantee how they'd respond. Mr. Urabeck offered to be available to present the CRC's views and argue their case from a technical standpoint.

It was noted the CRC had not yet determined a recipient to this planned letter. Ms. LaBarge asked how Seattle might play a role beyond the hatchery discussion, saying the city wants to partner in finding innovative solutions to this problem. Mr. Prinsen replied SPU is one of many entities who need to be involved in discussions to determine possible immediate actions. Mr. Urabeck suggested Mr. Brown reach out to Fred Gaetz and Jim Scott to pursue a

USACE presentation to the CRC, noting the Corps and Mr. Scott's research group should be relied upon to shape ideas to pursue. He advised more talks with the Muckleshoot tribe as well.

Mr. Brown asked if anyone besides Mr. Prinsen, Mr. Urabeck, and Mr. Phillips wished to be involved in the subcommittee to keep this issue elevated, adding that anyone interested can contact him or the three subcommittee members. Jeff Neuner volunteered to join. Mr. Prinsen reminded all not to forget the importance of other issues such as the proposed asphalt plant.

- **Cedar River Watershed:** Ms. LaBarge reported that due to last week's heavy snowpack, snowpack conditions in the watershed had been at well over 100% of normal. However, a subsequent atmospheric river came through the region and flushed much of the snow away. There have been heavy flows in the watershed. SPU continues to manage fish and water supply objectives, and to maintain a flood pocket to minimize impacts. Normal winter operations are in progress, with hopes the remainder of this winter will be mild.
- **CRC Member Updates:** There were no updates.

V) **CRC Work Session: Member Issues/Recruitment**

Mr. Brown asked CRC members to review the questions and member list sent with tonight's meeting announcement email. He said the CRC should ask:

- Is current membership relevant effective in this new (virtual) format?
- If not, what recommendations do members want to consider?
- If yes, the CRC should start recruiting for vacancies.

Mr. Prinsen agreed with this approach and added that the scheduled CRC meeting time should also be considered if it affects the ability of certain types of potential members to join these meetings.

VI) **Public Comment Period**

Larry Phillips noted the recent passing of Dr. Don Davidson of Bellevue, whom he remembered as a "tremendous ally" on issues of fish and natural resources.

VII) **Closing / Adjourn:**

Mr. Brown said that the next CRC meeting is March 23, 2021 and he will work on getting USACE to present.

Tonight's meeting adjourned at 8:17 pm.