



STATE OF WASHINGTON  
CONSERVATION COMMISSION

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February 5, 2014

Mr. Mike Grayum  
Executive Director  
Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission  
6730 Martin Way E.  
Olympia, Washington 98516

RE: Response to the NWIFC Correspondence of September 25, 2013

Dear Mr. Grayum:

In your letter of September 25, 2013, the Northwest Indian Fish Commission (NWIFC) requested the Conservation Commission consider adopting the NOAA buffer table and apply it as a condition to funding that the Conservation Commission (SCC) provides to conservation districts. The SCC discussed this request at its January meeting and asked that I communicate this response to you.

We agree it is critically important to ensure the protection and restoration of natural resources in our state. Our years of experience implementing voluntary conservation programs have provided many "lessons learned" for success. The Conservation Commission has declined to adopt the NMFS recommended interim buffer guidelines. We believe there are other ways we can address natural resource concerns in a manner that will ensure success.

Conservation districts (CDs) implement several important programs for the protection and restoration of natural resources. These programs rely on landowner participation. For landowners to willingly participate, our natural resource objectives must be met in a manner that maintains a viable agricultural economy. Several examples of our successful voluntary programs are:

- **Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)** – Studies show CREP has been successful in reducing stream temperature and increasing streamside habitat. Over the 15 year implementation of the program, the average buffer width has been 142 feet. A better indication of success is the length of streamside buffers. To date, over 735 miles of stream length are enrolled in CREP. Key elements of success in this program have been landowner participation, ongoing landowner maintenance of the sites, and funding incentives. CREP has demonstrated remarkable natural resource improvements at the watershed and sub-basin

scales when program implementation is targeted to a specific area with the goal of maximum landowner participation. This program is also a demonstration of close coordination with our federal partners at the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

- **Salmon Habitat Improvement** – Conservation districts are the largest recipient of funds from the Family Forest Fish Passage Program (FFFPP) which assists private forestland owners in replacing culverts and other stream crossing structures that keep trout, salmon, and other fish from reaching upstream habitat. CDs are successful in this program because of the local cooperation from a variety of entities, including many local tribes, working together with the landowners. Since 2003, nearly 200 landowners have taken advantage of the program that has replaced 244 barriers and opened more than 524 miles of stream habitat.
- **Irrigation Efficiencies** – The irrigation efficiencies program, implemented by the Conservation Commission with funding from Ecology, has successfully provided more water into streams for salmonid resources. To date, 57 irrigation efficiencies projects have returned 15,531 acre feet of water to 22 separate tributaries in seven fish-critical basins.

What these examples show is voluntary incentive-based programs can be effective in addressing natural resource concerns. The close cooperation of the CD's with the landowner ensures their participation will lead to long-term success. Over the 75-year history of our conservation system, we have learned that partnerships between landowners, conservation districts, the Conservation Commission, the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), tribes, state and local agencies, and local organizations enhance our opportunities for on-the-ground success.

As with any program, periodic review is needed to ensure continued success. The request in the letter of September 25, 2013, has presented an opportunity for the Conservation Commission, in conjunction with conservation districts, to assess our current practices. On the whole, we are proud of our accomplishments. However, we believe that the steps described below will make them even more successful. Thus, the Commission directed staff to take the following actions:

1. Identify ways to increase landowner participation in incentive-based programs.
2. Evaluate whether existing standards and practices used by conservation districts when working with landowners adequately address natural resource concerns, and improve the process for changing the standards and practices (if necessary).
3. Evaluate both the current system of identifying natural resource concerns at the watershed scale and identify ways conservation districts can incorporate this information into their work plans to determine whether changes are needed in this process.
4. Consider how these issues might be included in the next biennial budget development process for conservation districts and the Conservation Commission.

5. Identify funding sources necessary to assist conservation districts in implementing any recommended program changes.
6. Evaluate watershed scale processes to identify “lessons learned” that could inform work with conservation districts on these topics.
7. Identify, evaluate, and where appropriate implement monitoring approaches that will assist in tracking progress on improving natural resources concerns and apply adaptive management principles based on monitoring results. Benchmarks would also need to be identified to determine whether progress is being made.
8. Continue support for the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP).
9. Continue to support the efforts of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD), and conservation districts individually, in their efforts to build and continue strong working relationships with tribes.

These efforts will be made in close coordination with conservation districts and other partners, including tribes, state and local governments, federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations. We will also continue our close partnership with, and support for, NRCS in their continued development and application of the field office technical guide (FOTG) and other conservation planning tools to determine what is reasonable and needed to accomplish the natural resource concerns to be addressed. We recognize more detail will need to be added to specify how these actions will be implemented, but the Conservation Commission is committed, beginning now, to putting these actions in motion.

Also at their January meeting, the Conservation Commission expressed its interest in continued support for close working relationships between the tribes and conservation districts by appointing Commissioner Larry Davis as the Commission’s representative to the WACD Tribal Outreach Task Force. Many conservation districts already work very closely with a local tribe, including:

- Walla Walla CD partnering with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla on stream restoration projects.
- Snohomish CD working with the Stillaguamish Tribe of Indians on cooperative projects with farmers to restore salmon riparian habitat.
- Lewis CD working with the Chehalis Tribe on flood control and farm protection projects.

Over the past several years, the Conservation Commission has been working with our partners at the departments of Ecology and Agriculture on water quality and agricultural issues. It was during these discussions that we received the correspondence referred to in your letter of last September. Each of the referenced letters was addressed to the three directors and would therefore require a coordinated response from the three. However, the letters should have been acknowledged by my agency, and for that, I apologize. In meetings between Conservation Commission staff and NWIFC staff prior to the SCC taking action at its January meeting, our staff made a commitment to continue to work with your staff to review and discuss the items addressed in those letters.

Your September letter also referenced actions by districts that I feel warrants a response. The first was the statement that *"a few select conservation districts are ideologically opposed to working with federal fish agency expertise, and are unwilling to implement their recommendations."* We disagree with this statement. As noted above, conservation districts currently work very closely with state, federal, and tribal fish agency experts on project implementation. The second was the statement regarding the Puget Sound Conservation Districts (PSCD) caucus response to the PS Partnership request for comments on how National Estuary Program (NEP) funds should be spent. The PSCD response was answering specific questions asked by the Partnership. After indicating their support for funding a Shellfish Strategic Initiative and moving away from further studies and toward more on-the-ground implementation, the PSCD addressed the questions relating to pathogen investments. They encouraged decoupling pathogen funding from salmon recovery, not because they do not support efforts to restore salmon habitat, but because actions to address pathogens are different from those necessary to address salmon habitat restoration. The PSCD were encouraging a focus on onsite septic systems and increasing funding for PIC programs - something tribes also support.

The Conservation Commission acknowledges the importance of continued healthy salmon populations, cool clean water, and the need to make progress on improving our natural resources. Through our actions I hope you will see that the Conservation Commission takes seriously its commitment to review and, where necessary, improve our conservation system to ensure resource protection and restoration in the context of a vibrant agricultural economy. We believe the two are compatible and hope that you do as well.

We look forward to working with you, the member tribes of the NWIFC, and tribes across the state to make sustainable, long-lasting improvements to the resources we all share.

Sincerely,



Mark Clark  
Executive Director

cc: Governor Jay Inslee  
Roylene Rides at the Door, State Conservationist, NRCS  
Dennis McLerran, Administrator, US EPA Region 10  
Will Stelle, Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries  
Maia Bellon, Director, Washington Department of Ecology  
Bud Hover, Director Washington Department of Agriculture  
Dan Opalski, US EPA Region 10  
Jerrod Davis, Office of Shellfish and Water Protection, Washington Department of Health  
Alan Stromberger, President Washington Association of Conservation Districts