

Mazama Pocket Gopher Working Group

UPDATES & MEETING MINUTES – MORNING SESSION

Date: 14 December 2023

Location: NRCS Olympia Office

Text in boxes was provided as a written update.

ATTENDEES

Center for Natural Lands Management (CNLM): Anika Goldner

Ecostudies Institute: Anita Michalak, Elspeth Kim, Sarah Hamman, Adam Martin

Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM): Leif Wefferling, Tim Leque

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): Marty Chaney, Noah Bates

Pheasants Forever: Wyatt Wood

Pierce County: Scott Sissons

Sentinel Landscapes: Dan Calvert

Thurston County: Marisa Whisman

US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS): Erin Gray, Kim Flotlin, Cassie Doll (Partners Program), Rebecca Currin, Jose Carranza, Erin Adams, Zach Radmer, Nick George

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW): Adrian Frediani, Christa Rolls, Noll Steinweg, Emily Butler, Julia Smith, Bill Kronland

Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT): Katina Kapantais

GENERAL UPDATES

Introduction – Elspeth Kim (Ecostudies)

Welcome, working group goals, and introductions.

Federal Update – Kim Flotlin and Zach Radmer (USFWS)

Personnel Updates: USFWS, Lacey, WA (USFWS – WA-ES)

The Washington Ecological Services (WA-ES) office Mazama pocket gopher co-leads include Kim Flotlin (all 4 federally listed subspecies; Kim_Flotlin@fws.gov), Zach Radmer (Roy Prairie PG; Zachary_Radmer@fws.gov), Erin Gray (Olympia PG; Erin_Gray@fws.gov), Erin Adams (Yelm PG; Erin_Adams@fws.gov), and Tara Vogel (Tenino PG; Tara_Vogel@fws.gov). All of these staff work on the WA-ES office's Prairies and Salish Sea Islands Zone Team.

Bush Prairie (Port of Olympia and City of Tumwater) Habitat Conservation Plan Development:

Bush Prairie Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) – The Port of Olympia (including the Olympia Airport) and the City of Tumwater are developing an HCP with the USFWS WA-ES office that will include expansion of infrastructure (hangers, buildings, businesses) at the Olympia Airport, as well as residential, commercial, and industrial development within the City of Tumwater. The Olympia Airport has the largest local population of Olympia pocket gopher in the range of the species, and envelops the single designated Critical Habitat Unit for this subspecies. The USFWS and the HCP applicants are developing a conservation strategy (coordinated with the Federal Aviation Administration) that will be incorporated in the HCP, with a goal toward providing mitigation for both permanent and temporary impacts to Olympia pocket gopher and their habitat. Mitigation would

include permanent protection and management of prairie habitat for the benefit of Olympia pocket gopher, and minimizing impacts due to covered activities through the use of Best Management Practices. Final HCP completion schedule and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process are still to be determined. For more information, contact Rebecca Currin at Rebecca_Currin@fws.gov.

City of Yelm Habitat Conservation Plan Development:

The City of Yelm is developing an HCP with the USFWS WA-ES office that will cover activities such as residential, commercial, municipal, and industrial development, transportation maintenance, City park and water resources management, utility and sewer installation and maintenance, street tree replacement, and conservation lands management. The City's HCP is still in development; they anticipate completing a final draft plan sometime in 2024. The timing and type of draft final National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) associated with this HCP is still to be determined. For more information, contact Kim Flotlin at Kim_Flotlin@fws.gov.

2023 MPG Screening Training:

In June of 2023, the USFWS provided a 2-day MPG screening training to 19 attendees. Attendees were a mix of consultants and municipal or county employees, some of whom attended the training as a refresher. Training included both classroom and field aspects of learning and testing. Qualified biologists were added to the USFWS list of MPG screening consultants. For more information, contact Kim Flotlin at Kim_Flotlin@fws.gov.

In 2022, the MPG Recovery Plan was finalized and published (PDF available on the fws.gov site as well as CPOP). The USFWS Recovery Planning process includes three separate documents: the Recovery Plan itself, the Species Biological Report or Species Status Assessment (SBR/SSA), and the Recovery Implementation Strategy (RIS). A recovery plan is a road map to recovery, providing guidance on how best to help listed species achieve recovery. The SBR/SSA is a source of the most recent biological and population status information on a species. A RIS is a list of actions that will need to be taken to achieve recovery. None of these are regulatory documents. The Recovery Plan is a static, finalized document; it can be amended or updated, but to do so takes at least a couple of years. The SBR/SSA and the RIS are both fluid documents that can be easily updated as new information is learned.

Misc. Updates:

- The Thurston County HCP is complete.
- The Alpacas of America Reserve has been acquired.
- There is a proposal through ACUB to fund some endowments.
- The NRCS programmatic biological opinion is complete.
- There is current work to replace the JBLM programmatic biological opinion and tie it into the Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan. This will include a commitment to three reserves for MPG, with the target of 1000 individuals occupying these areas.

Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife Update – Christa Rolls (WDFW)

- New Species Lead for MPG recovery as of September 2023 – Christa Rolls
- New Restoration Ecologist for MPG science as of September 2023 – Erica Henry
- New Prairie Protection Specialist for MPG land acquisition as of November 2023 – Adrian Frediani
- Request for additional species information about MPG demographics, habitat conditions, threats and trends to populations, and existing conservation measures that have benefitted the species went out in November 2023 to the public. This will help inform updates to the Periodic Status Review in 2025.
- Coordinating with JBLM and Ecostudies on abundance protocol methods and implementation for 2024 field season.

SURVEYS & MONITORING

WDFW Survey Updates – Christa Rolls (WDFW)

Survey Notes

- Concerted effort over a 3-week period (23 Oct. - 8 Nov.) with an average of 3-4 surveyors per survey day yielded approximately 750 acres surveyed using the MPG abundance protocol in 2023 (see table below).
- No abundance surveys conducted at Shelton Airport – planning for 2024.
- Century Preserve: only 2 MPG mounds recorded on abundance transect surveys; eastern segment has tall vegetation unsuitable for accurately detecting mounds; southern segment full of mole mounds.
- Rocky NAP: No fresh mounds detected (even off-survey) throughout site, only noticeably older mounds.

Table 1: Sites surveyed for Mazama Pocket Gopher (MPG) by WDFW using abundance protocol.					
Site Name	Size (ha)	2020	2021	2022	2023
Century Preserve (mitigation site)	17.4	NS	NS	NS	Occupied – fresh mounds detected
McKenna Meadows (mitigation site)	2.26	NS	NS	NS	Occupied – fresh mounds detected
Olympia Airport	280.04	NS	Occupied – fresh mounds detected (Zone A only)	Occupied – fresh mounds detected (Zones A, B, C only)	Occupied – fresh mounds detected (all remaining Zones)
Rocky Prairie NAP (DNR)	14.61	NS	NS	NS	Unknown – no fresh mounds detected
Scatter Creek North (WDFW)	126.93	Occupied – fresh mounds detected	NS	NS	NS
Scatter Creek South (WDFW)	131.04	Occupied – fresh mounds detected	NS	NS	NS
Violet Prairie (WDFW)	34.19	N/A	Occupied – fresh mounds detected	NS	NS
West Rocky Prairie (WDFW)	97.50	Occupied – fresh mounds detected	NS	NS	NS
Wilridge (Cons. Easement)	29.17	Occupied – fresh mounds detected	NS	NS	NS
Wolf Haven	13.04	Occupied – fresh mounds detected	NS	NS	NS

Ecostudies Survey Updates (WCRI Sites) – Sarah Hamman (Ecostudies)

As part of the conservation grazing project, Ecostudies is working with private landowners to integrate restoration and conservation rotational grazing. These efforts focus primarily on grassland birds and pollinators, but gophers are also part of the picture. Only one site was observed to have potential for gophers (located across the highway from Scatter Creek). Work is currently being done to remove noxious invasive weeds to better support possible gopher habitat.

Discussion:

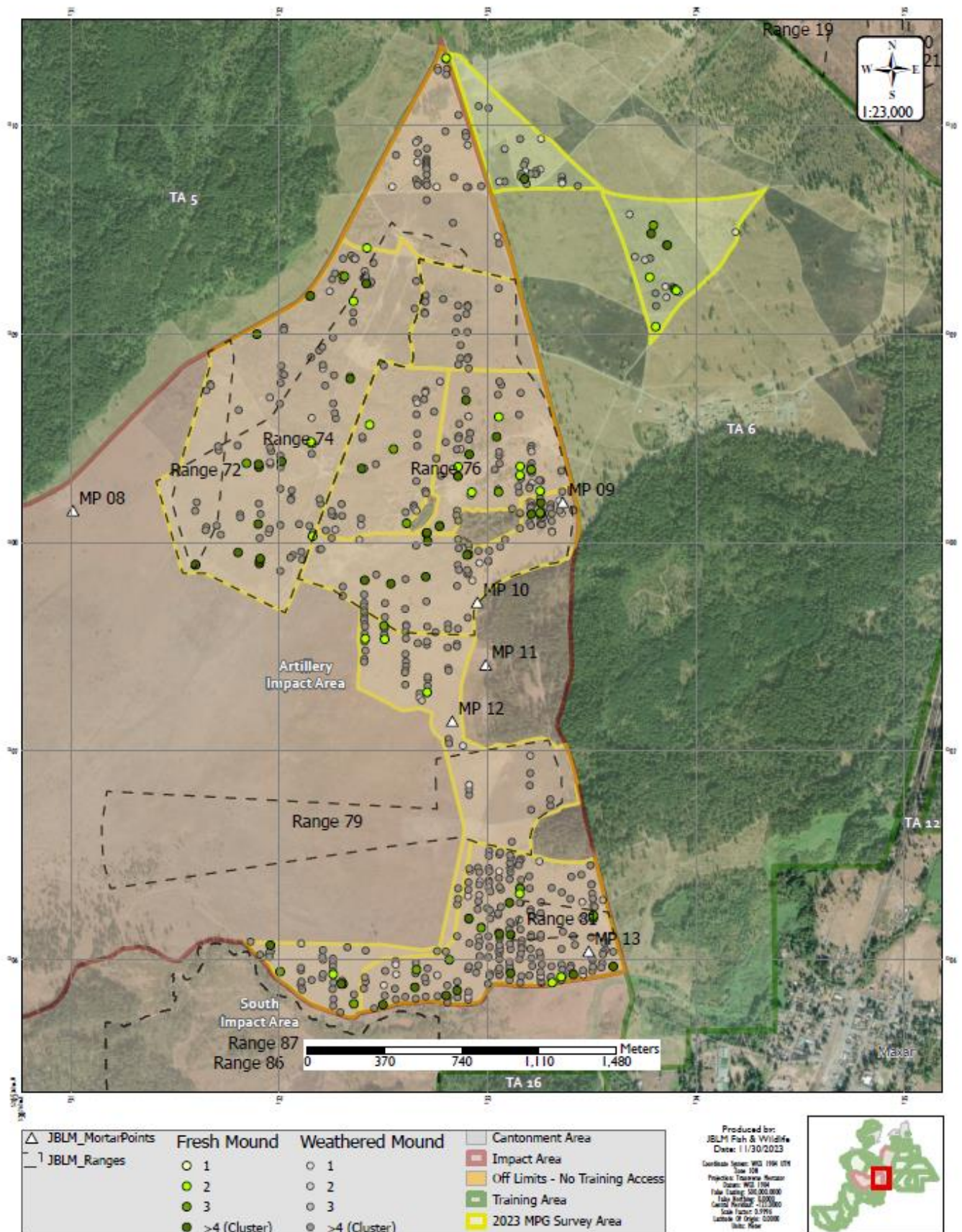
In response to a question about how participating counties are chosen, Sarah notes that WCRI funding only supports the Chehalis basin with a focus on coastal work. Other sources of funding are being sought to expand these sites (including the Mason County area, among others).

JBLM Survey Updates – Tim Leque (JBLM)

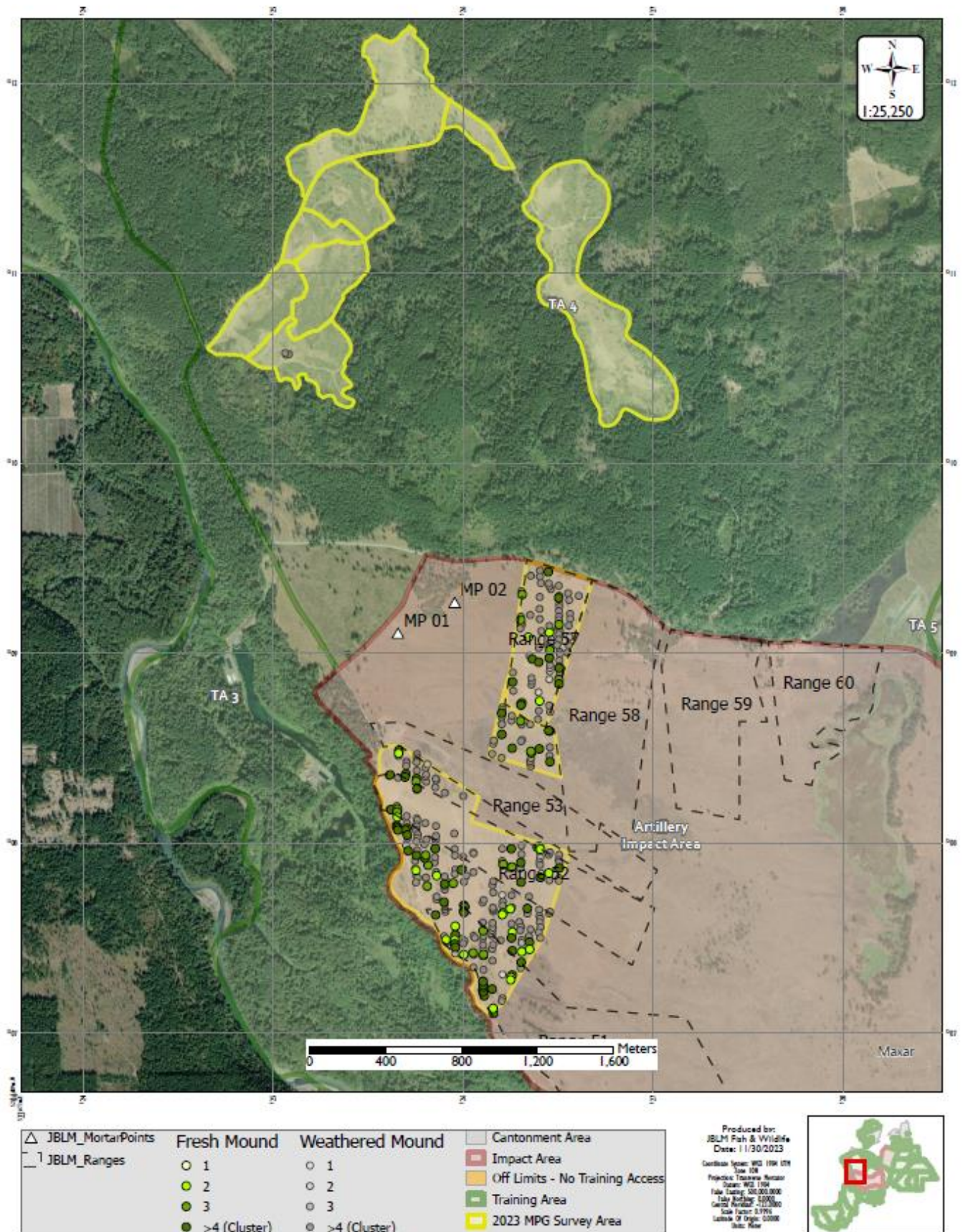
2023 Occupancy Surveys were conducted in the following areas:

- Training Area 04 (Rumble Hill area)
- Training Area 06
- Artillery Impact Area – West (Ranges 51, 52 & 57)
- Artillery Impact Area – East (Ranges 72, 74, 76, 79 & 81; Mortar Points 10, 11, 12 & 13)

2023 MPG SURVEYS - AIA EAST & TA 06



2023 MPG SURVEYS - AIA WEST & RUMBLE HILL



2022 Occupancy Surveys were conducted in the following areas:

- Training Areas 07 South, 09, 10, 11, 13 & 15
- Training Areas 05 & 06
- Central Impact Area (Ranges 1, 2A, 2B, 2C, 3, 4, 5, 6A, 6B, 6C, 7, 8, 9, 10, 17A, 17B, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25S, 25M, 25A, 25B, 25C, 27, 28, 30, 31A & 31B)
- Artillery Impact Area – North (Mortar Points 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8)
- Artillery Impact Area – West (Ranges 50 & 51)
- South Impact Area (Ranges 86, 87, 88, 91, 92, 93 & 94; Mortar Point 14)

2022-2023 Abundance Survey Trial

- Worked with WDFW to test out abundance protocol in TA06 during fall of 2022.
- Worked with WDFW again in fall of 2023 to work out questions/details/nuances of abundance protocol.
- Planning to conduct abundance surveys on JBLM beginning in fall of 2024.

Discussion:

- Bill Kronland, WDFW: Is there evidence of an expanded footprint into deforested/altered areas?
Answer: Yes, and gophers have been seen there.
- Marisa Whisman, Thurston County: What did the understory at these sites previously look like?
Answer: Mostly shrubby, prairie, etc.
- Kim Flotlin, USFWS: How can we prevent gophers from eating tree roots?
Answer: By selectively choosing where to place clear cuts far enough away that gophers cannot find their way to them. This may not always be possible.

Marty Chaney reports that she has seen gophers go up roads to access clear cuts. Bill Kronland mentions that commercial harvest occurred at Scatter Creek North around 2018/2019, and by 2022 there were gophers in that clearcut. If there are prairie soils there almost certainly will be gophers. Kim says that not a lot of timber harvests on gopher soils are happening in Thurston County, so she is not familiar with gopher response to clear cuts in that county. In reference to “gopher soil,” Marty mentions that native prairies are located where they are because the soil is rocky, shallow, and steep—all of which are restrictions for gophers. Gopher soil is a flexible term—the two things that matter are (1) can gophers burrow through and (2) do they have something to eat on the landscape.

- Dan Calvert: Can HCPs get credit for “theoretical habitat” (i.e., habitat that isn’t ideal at the time of purchase, but can become better habitat later when it gets developed)?
Answer: Not really.

Bill Kronland recounts that Scatter Creek timber harvests were not profitable because of cleanup and other associated costs. Nick George mentions that the incentive for developing MPG habitat would be to increase grazing land; habitat gets occupied quickly. Kim Flotlin states there is no guarantee that you can clear an area located on gopher soils and not have gophers enter, but it has happened, so it is not impossible. Bill says as you introduce prescribed fire to a landscape and/or open up an area, you must maintain the habitat to keep it open. [Prairies and grasslands are an early successional habitat type, and as such will require regular management to maintain those features important to MPG occupancy.] As a result, grazing is not currently happening at West Rocky and Scatter Creek.

Abundance Protocol Update – Christa Rolls (WDFW)

There have been many years of testing methods for the MPG abundance protocol. The most recent finding is that active mounding is related to gopher presence directly under those mounds. In other words, an active fluffy mound is representative of gopher activity under that mound.

The protocol consists of laying out transects on a site and counting/recording the mounds encountered along a given transect. You then look at mound clusters and the distance between them to determine which mounds are created by one gopher vs another (components of intra- and inter-gopher mounding activity). After locating areas where gopher occupancy is assumed, areas are sectioned out, transects are created, and high-precision GPS units

are used to walk transects and record active mounds within ½ meter on either side of a transect (1 m total width). Transects are a minimum of 30 m apart to avoid overlap.

One of the largest components and challenges is finding the appropriate weather conditions under which to survey. A small amount of rain is good to see mounding, but it is best to wait one or two days after rain so that the mounds have dried a bit and become “fluffier.” Rain influences whether the mounds are fresh or old, and the efficacy of the protocol therefore depends on the right weather conditions.

Ultimately, abundance estimates are site-specific; comparisons cannot be made between sites because they each differ in several factors, including management, soil type, etc. The protocol will be finalized in spring 2024 before the next field season.

Discussion:

- Bill Kronland, WDFW: Is there a way to break up the transects so you can model them and see what management components drive abundance?

Answer: It is difficult to map variables on a long transect, so this hasn't been done yet.

Bill mentions that WDFW plans to use this protocol at Scatter Creek, so it would be convenient to have variables for breaking up and characterizing specific parcels, transects, etc. Christa emphasizes that it is difficult to characterize transects as they are highly heterogenous. Kim Flotlin suggests that vegetation data could be gathered.

- Bill: Abundance is good but expensive metric; is it possible to get an occupancy metric?

Answer: Not currently.

- Anita Michalak, Ecostudies: Are there differences in mounding behavior between males and females? Adults and juveniles?

Answer: There isn't a lot of current behavioral data on MPG, so we don't have knowledge of any existing differences.

- Erin Gray, USFWS: How do you determine how many transects there are per site?

Answer: Ideally, transect length over the whole site isn't longer than 10 total km. Each individual transect is approximately 100 m in length.

Emily Butler wonders about extending site area if new habitat is created and/or found outside of current survey habitat. Christa answers that it would be possible to add it between survey years, but not within a season to maintain consistency.

- Zach Radmer, USFWS: Has the protocol been repeated at any one site enough to see annual variability?

Answer: Not yet, but this is the hope in coming years.

- Adam Martin, Ecostudies: Have you looked at surveying the same transect multiple times within a season to see how reliable the abundance estimates are?

Answer: Not yet; time is a major limiting factor.

REGULATORY PROTECTION STRATEGIES

Thurston County Habitat Conservation Plan – Marisa Whisman (Thurston County)

We are nearing the closure of the first year of processing building permits through the HCP permitting system. Data from the permitting process is still being gathered for our HCP annual report, and we will have more information after the first of the year. Building our HCP Conservation Land System is an ongoing process. We have acquired three properties so far to cover the MPG in the Yelm pocket gopher south service area, one of which will also be managed for the TCB, with collaborative site management partnership with WDFW. These three properties total 96.74 ac. One of these parcels (39.4 ac) will be also be used as a conservation grazing education and outreach site, to be managed by WSU Extension, and will also serve as a strategizing tool for future Working Lands Easements under the HCP. We are also in the process of acquiring a 25-ac site for the Oregon spotted frog in the Olympia pocket gopher service area, and are in the early stages of looking into the potential purchase of a 5-ac site in the Tenino pocket gopher service area. We have also extended our HCP Phase 4 grant funds for the purpose of community and county permitting staff education and outreach. More to come soon!

CNLM Updates – Sanders Freed (CNLM)

Mazama Meadows: After a flurry of activity and a document finalizing, Thurston County stepped back to re-examine the bank. Scotch broom has quickly overtaken the site. Still closed.

ACUB properties

- *Violet Preserve:* *Vulpia* infestation has diminished as methods for control have been developed. Only 19 acres remain unseeded/unrestored. Gopher presence has remained consistent with activity adjacent to Fisher Ranch.
- *Deschutes Preserve:* Similar to Violet—*Vulpia* invasion has been managed, and over 30 acres have been seeded with natives. Gophers are present north of the trail, and expansion into seeded areas is expected, as they remain on the margins of the treatment areas.

Individual HCP properties

- *Leitner Preserve:* Gopher expansion continues across the west parcel. Leitner has met HCP standards.
- *Deschutes Corridor:* Finally burned and seeded in 2023. Gopher expansion is expected from Bush Prairie farm.
- *Century Preserve:* Continued occupancy, but difficult to survey without burning due to dense vegetation.

MANAGING, ENHANCING & MAINTAINING HABITAT

Grazing Study Updates – Sarah Hamman (Ecostudies)

The conservation grazing study was funding through the Western SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) program. Ecostudies and partners worked with ranchers to rotate their cattle through sites in a frequent rotation; the focus was on maintaining a stubble height of 3 inches. The study design consisted of six paddocks split into one-acre treatments on each farm. Of these, one paddock was assigned Conservation Grazing Practice (CGP) and another would continue Business as Usual (BAU). Seeding from a selection of about 10 species (including golden paintbrush) occurred at two sites.

It was found that conservation grazing enhanced species richness for both native and non-native species. Forage availability was also either maintained or enhanced with conservation grazing. At CGPs, gopher occupancy increased from 55% to 80% (over the course of two years from 2018 to 2020).

Discussion:

- Bill Kronland, WDFW: What was the quality of forage in an increasing diversity of forbs?
Answer: Quality was not sacrificed; we chose 10 species that are edible and not detrimental, and there must be a balance between non-native forage grass species and native forb species.
Marty Chaney also notes that with conservation grazing, you get a more intensive grazing system.
- Adam Martin, Ecostudies: Did you see the same suite of species with the increase in native species?
Answer: Mostly annuals were seen; some perennials had just started coming in.
- Adrian Frediani, WDFW: How do operators feel about the new system?
Answer: A handful of ranchers are really engaged, but conservation grazing costs more money so we need to figure out how to balance the financial benefit. Participating ranchers span several generations.
- Christa Rolls, WDFW: Did seeding occur at the same time as grazing?
Answer: All sites were grazed in the fall, followed by seeding done via drop-feeding with a chain harrow, and then grazing was rotated back in either the spring or the following fall.
- Bill: There is a spectrum of prairie quality; what are the expectations along the spectrum for conservation grazing?
Answer: Depends on the site, but the hope is very high-quality prairie with well-established perennial species.
- Cassie Doll, USFWS: How did pollinators (especially butterflies) respond to conservation grazing?
Answer: Butterflies spent more time in conservation grazing paddocks than BAU paddocks. There are more resources to keep butterflies in place longer, alluding to better habitat; see Sam Bussan's work.

Habitat Management and Planning – Christa Rolls (WDFW)

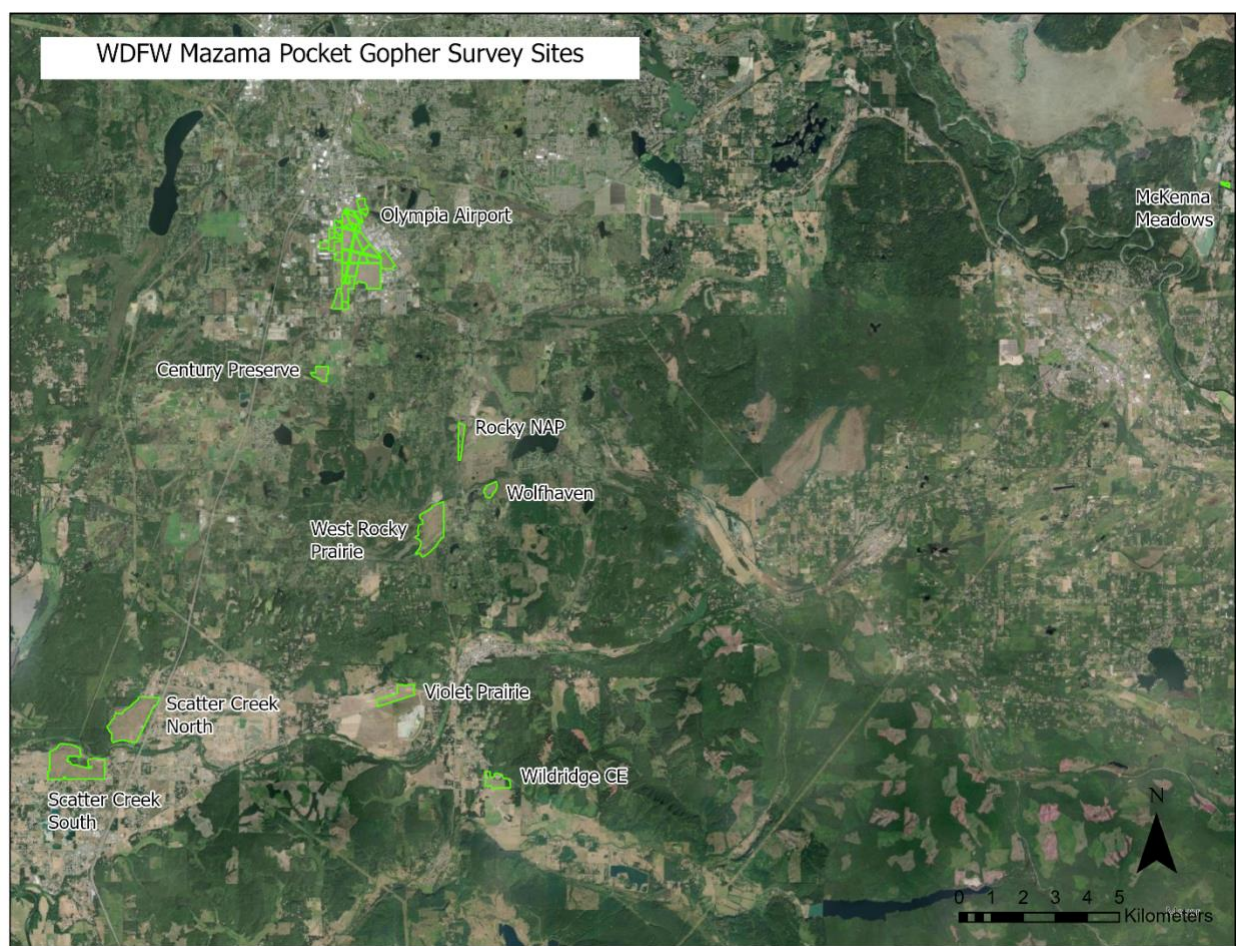
Forest Health Projects

- Phased Restoration Pathway oak release at Scatter Creek WLA to restore 52.5 acres with Spanaway and mixed Spanaway/Yelm soils
- Active restoration underway at West Rocky Prairie

Scatter Creek Habitat Management Plan development

- MPG management planning components – incorporates metrics for suitable habitat

Grazing lease being planned for Violet Prairie (WDFW) for implementation in 2024.



Scatter Creek Wildlife Area – Bill Kronland (WDNR)

Scatter Creek Unit

Vegetation Management: Conducted 3 controlled burns on gopher occupied lands (8.4 acres south tract, 11.1 & 3.2 acres north tract). Two of these burn units were on oak-prairie ecotones, allowing us to ‘push’ prairie plant composition with post-burn enhancements into the oak understory and potentially expand gopher occupancy. We also mowed and/or chemically treated approximately 100+ acres of Scot’s broom across both tracts on areas not treated with fire.

Forest Health: Phase I & II oak release project commercially thinned and improved approximately 65 acres of prairie-oak landscape on both tracts of the Scatter Creek Unit between 2018 and 2020. Wildlife Area and Forest Health staff have continued to conduct habitat enhancement on the project footprint and expanded gopher occupancy has been observed in many areas, in addition to use by rare butterflies.

We plan to implement Phase III of this project in summer 2024 or 2025 focusing on removing non-oak trees from approximately 60 acres north of the Scatter Creek channel on the north tract of the Unit. We anticipate implementation of prairie vegetation enhancements on the newly opened understory to realize additional expansion of gopher occupancy.

West Rocky Unit

Vegetation Management: Conducted 2 controlled burns on or in the vicinity of gopher occupied lands (8.1 and 2.8 acres). One burn unit was on oak-prairie ecotones. We followed both burns with fall habitat enhancements (i.e., weed treatment, seeding, planting plugs) as well as seeding into some 2022 burns that experienced poor post-fire germination due to the relatively dry conditions of late 2022 and early 2023. We also mowed and/or chemically treated 50+ acres of Scot's broom on non-burned areas of the Unit while continuing our effort to expand our focus east and south onto prairie landscapes that have not historically received intensive enhancements.

Forest Health: A commercial thinning project was implemented to restore and improve approximately 50 acres oak woodland/savannah landscape on prairie soils of the West Rocky Unit in summer 2023, greatly increasing the potential for expanded gopher occupancy in the area. The project also included tree removal from 9 acres of native Salish Prairie. The project footprint stretches from the currently existing prairie to approximately 1.5 miles west as the 'crow flies' to the Tiley Road gate. Extensive areas south of Beaver Creek were also opened. Slash cleaning efforts are currently wrapping up, and we were able to take advantage of bare soil conditions and seed native prairie species into many areas this fall. We plan to continue post-harvest enhancement efforts into the future with additional seeding, vegetation management actions, and implementation of controlled burns to solidify and expand on the gains achieved with this project.

Acquisition Status: The Violet Prairie Unit conserves approximately 175 acres of gopher-occupied native Salish Prairie and about 94 acres of oak woodland/savannah. Approximately 85 acres of Salish Prairie portion is still held by The Conservation Fund and is anticipated to be transferred to WDFW in winter/spring 2024. We also anticipate opening the Unit in some capacity to public access by end of spring 2024.

Vegetation Management: We initiated broom control efforts on native Salish Prairie landscapes currently held by WDFW and occupied by gophers in winter 2022. More intensive efforts such as controlled burning, seeding, and planting plugs will be initiated following a cultural review process (currently on-going) and development of burn plans (anticipated to be initiated winter 2024).

Conservation Grazing: In spring 2024 we anticipate implementation of conservation grazing on gopher-occupied grasslands of the Violet Prairie Unit. Our aim in this effort is to reduce biomass and create vegetation structure more like native Salish Prairie landscapes that could make future enhancement efforts more successful. We have recently announced a 'call for bids' and will be selecting a producer sometime in January 2024.

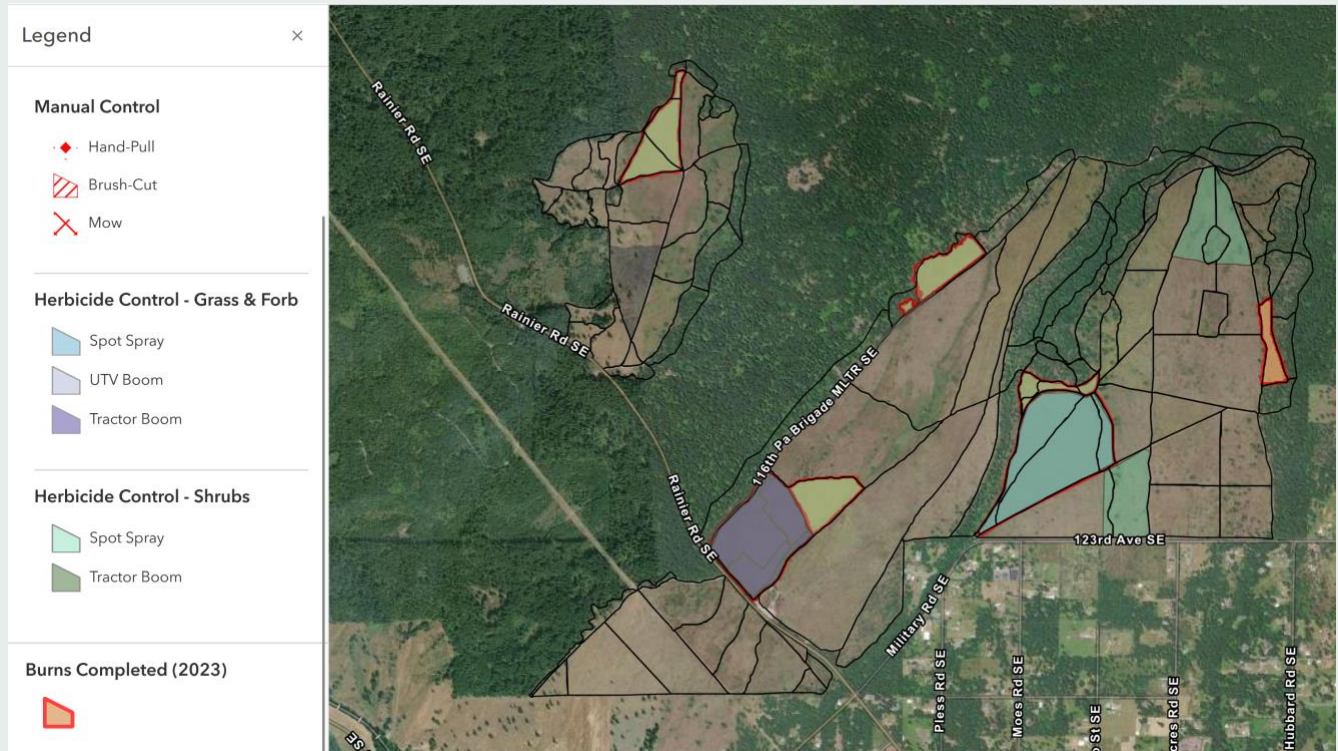
Discussion:

Julia Smith notes there is opportunity for a communications project to document the storytelling around conservation grazing.

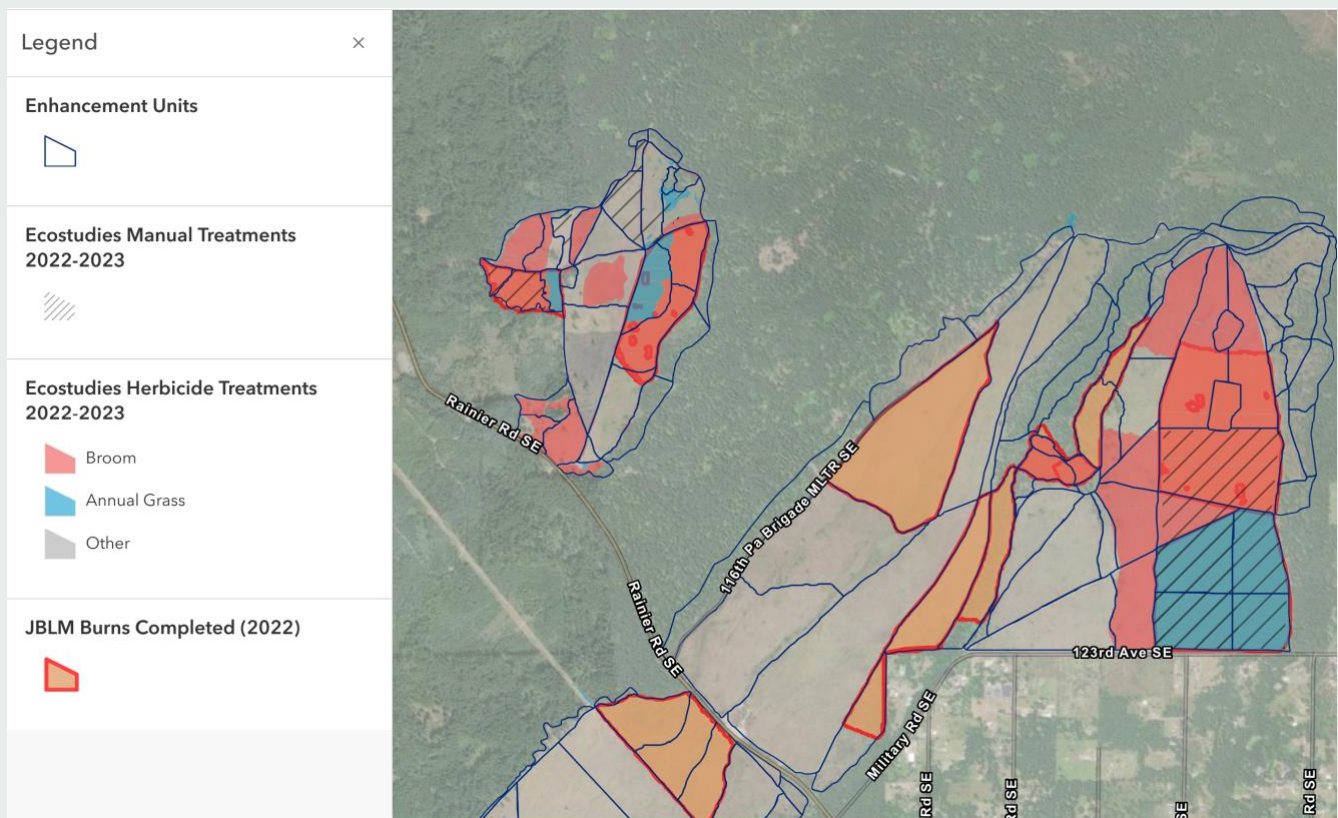
Ecostudies Institute Update – Adam Martin (Ecostudies)

On JBLM since 2021 we have continued our regular habitat enhancement actions for Mazama Pocket Gopher. The most intensive efforts have been in the Rainier Training Area (RTA), where we continue to control Scot's Broom, perennial grasses, and annual grasses through prescribed fire, chemical and mechanical (Scot's broom) means. Our progress in controlling large dense stands of Scot's Broom in Johnson Prairie and Upper Weir have been particularly successful, and now there are only a few remaining continuous stands of Scot's broom in the Southeastern corner of Lower Weir and parts of South Weir. Our seeding efforts in the RTA have focused on increasing bunch grass cover, and establishing native tap-rooted forbs. We have limited our control of non-native forbs such as hairy cat's ear,

since they are often used as food for gophers, and the past few years of summer drought anecdotally appear to have lessened the density and extent of the hairy cat's ear invasion.



Above: Habitat Enhancement Actions in the Rainier Training Area, JBLM in 2022.



Above: Habitat Enhancement Actions in the Rainier Training Area, JBLM in 2023.

Discussion:

- Nick George, USFWS: How do winter burns impact *Vulpia*?

Answer: *Vulpia* is a huge problem, but winter burning did a good job. (See Sanders Freed or the CPOP listserv archive for *Vulpia* management tips.) Follow up treatments are being conducted this fall, but it will take a couple years to fully eradicate.

It is worth noting that with scotch broom, you get top kill but winter resprout, so winter burning is not recommended.

JBLM Restoration Updates – Tim Leque (JBLM)

Prescribed Fire

- In 2023 258 acres of Mazama pocket gopher habitat was burned on JBLM during the winter, summer, and fall.
- Summer and fall burns were targeted to occur during cooler/milder weather conditions.

Herbicide

- 33 acres of 2023 burned MPG habitat were treated for exotic grasses using Clethodim and Esplanade herbicides.
- Follow-up Scotch broom treatments are in progress.

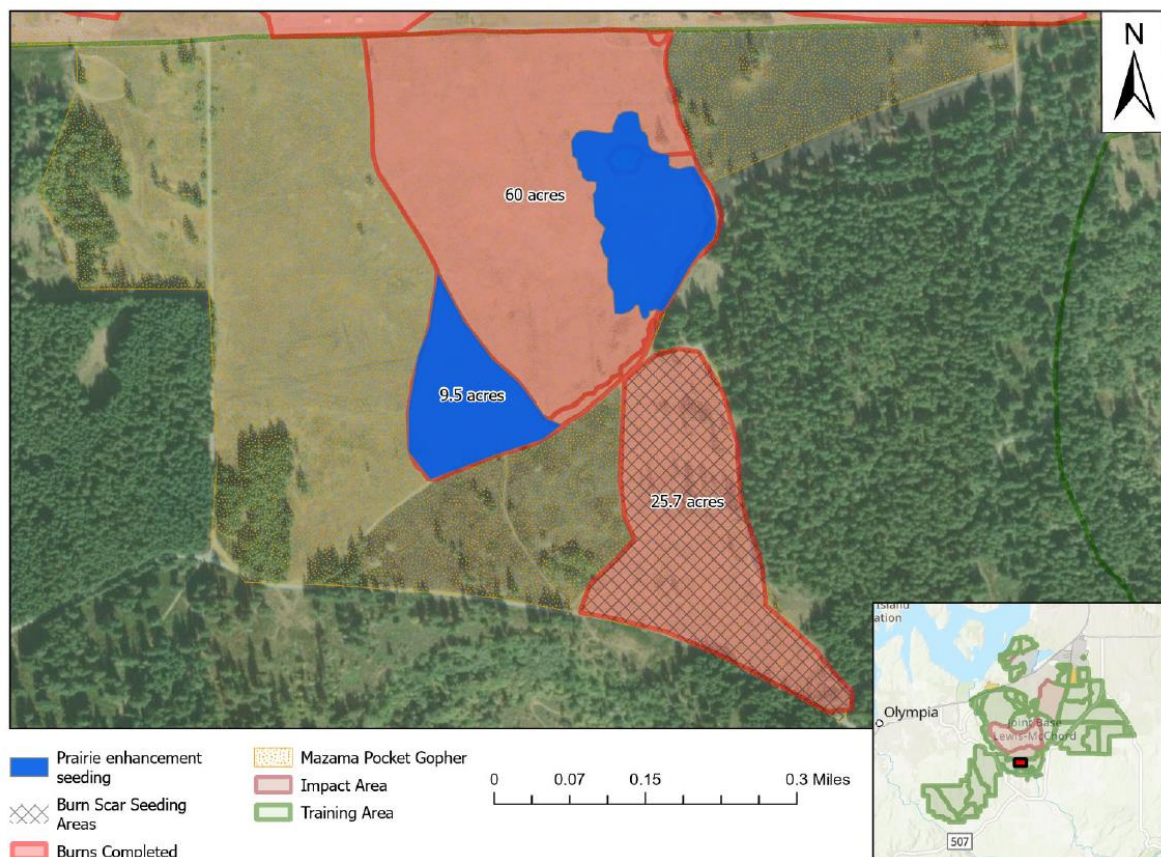
Seeding

- 57 acres of 2023 burn units in MPG habitat were broadcast-seeded with a native prairie seed mix of grasses and forbs.
- Additionally, 85 acres were surveyed for burn scars and hand-seeded them with fescue.

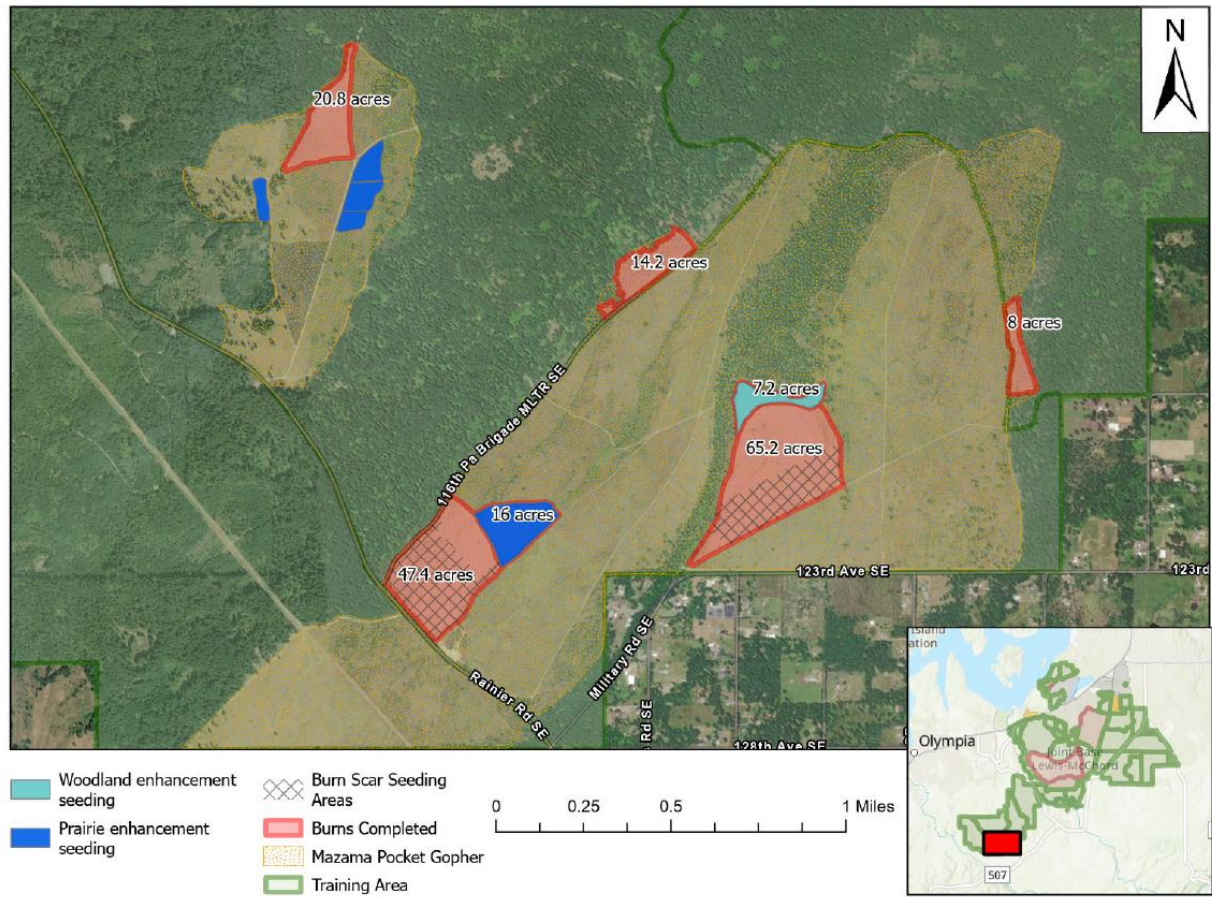
Integrated Training Area Management (ITAM)

- 67.5 pounds of seed went into 4.847 acres in TA06 and the Rainier Training Areas (TAs 21, 22 & 23) during 2023.
- 15,700 plugs were also planted in TA06 and the Rainier Training Areas during 2023.

2023 JBLM Mazama Pocket Gopher Restoration: Marion Prairie



2023 JBLM Mazama Pocket Gopher Restoration: Rainier Training Area



Additional Updates

- Stay tuned for the South Sound Science Symposium taking place October 2024. Dan Calvert is on the planning committee and can be contacted with questions.
- There are three new conservation planners at the NRCS Olympia Office. Their contact info can be obtained from Marty Chaney.

Mazama Pocket Gopher Working Group

UPDATES & MEETING MINUTES – AFTERNOON SESSION

Date: 14 December 2023

Location: NRCS Olympia Office

ATTENDEES

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NRCS: Marty Chaney

Sentinel Landscapes: Dan Calvert

USFWS: Erin Gray, Kim Flotlin, Cassie Doll (Partners Program), Rebecca Currin, Jose Carranza, Erin Adams, Zach Radmer

WDFW: Christa Rolls, Emily Butler, Julia Smith, Bill Kronland

RIS REVIEW | SECTIONS IN GRAY NOT ACTIVELY DISCUSSED DURING MEETING

RECOVERY ACTION 1: Protect, conserve, and enhance MPG habitat.

General discussion:

- Christa Rolls: Species listed are only federal; should we consider adding state-listed species as well?
Kim Flotlin responds that the RIS is specific to federally-listed species, but that doesn't mean we can't insert lines for state-listed species. Elspeth Kim asks if these tasks would be ones that partners, such as WDFW, implement? (TBD). It also TBD if such tasks will be outlined in the updated SWAP. It would be helpful to add task lines for state-listed species, but only for the draft of the document and not the official version available online.
- All sections of Recovery Action 1 are considered "top priority." They are listed in the approximate order they should be carried out.

1.1 Identify and prioritize creation and protection of Reserves.

Kim Flotlin states that reserve boundaries are not currently set, but the general location of recovery units are described in the Recovery Plan.

JBLM is not considered a reserve. Marty Chaney wonders if this allows more activities to occur at JBLM sites that might destroy habitat. Zach Radmer responds that this isn't the case, but that there will likely be a decision that a long-term biological listing (JBLM's current designation) will count as a reserve. Marty mentions that special protections should be in place on some parts of JBLM to maintain a lifeboat in case other actions fail.

Zach mentions that action surrounding activities 1.1 – 1.3 is not currently happening—the focus is knocking down roadblocks. Now that the Thurston County HCP is finalized, Section 6 funds can be accessed to purchase lands that support the HCP; this will also line the schedule up for looking at properties across the landscape.

Bill Kronland asks if there are recovery areas that need more focus? Answer: Generally, yes—Brad Prairie is OK, but Yelm PG Sound need more preserves, as North High Prairie is facing considerable developmental pressures. It would be difficult to create more recovery areas for Olympia and Tenino PG.

Christa Rolls asks if ACUB is currently limited in being able to acquire lands with a minimum of 50 acres, would it be possible to overcome that requirement by acquiring a greater number of small properties? Answer: Not

really, as this would result in a sort of game of Monopoly with land, wherein you would have to wait to acquire multiple small properties for them to be considered a recovery area and hold value.

Bill Kronland wonders if purchasing land through Section 6 undermines the county in reaching HCP goals? Rebecca Currin replies that it doesn't, as it's more a matter of collaboration than competition and it is crucial to talk with county regulators to not create bidding wars.

Marty Chaney asks if the Reserves can be farmed. Answer: Yes, though there are no current requirements for farmers looking to put conservation easements on their properties. This will need to be figured out, because there is no financial bonus for restricting certain farming activities. Bill Kronland wonders if CEs are more restrictive than the 4(d) Rule—Kim Flotlin responds that they could be, but not necessarily. The goal of reserves is to reach a stable or increasing population of 1,000 animals, on medium- or high-quality habitat, regardless of how this number is obtained.

1.2 Purchase occupied areas and areas of suitable habitat to form Reserves.

1.3 Implement other short- and long-term strategies to protect Reserves and other important MPG sites from development pressure (e.g., mitigation lands, interim permitting strategy, in lieu fee, programmatic HCPs, municipal HCPs).

Considered an alternative to 1.2 (aka purchase vs protection).

1.4 Develop and cooperatively implement programs for the protection and conservation of MPGs, South Puget Sound prairies, oak savanna, and other prairie-dependent species. This can include, but is not limited to, grant funding, habitat acquisition, habitat restoration, regulatory reform programs and policies, management plans, zoning, migration, research, and monitoring for each subspecies.

Marty Chaney asks where the money to manage land comes from once the land has been obtained. What is the long-term plan? What do you do in year 10/15/20 of management? No current answer; something like this needs to be added to the action list.

Zach Radmer suggests that easement criteria should be developed that are (1) agreeable and conducive for private agricultural activities and (2) meet the federal ESA credit criteria of the entity purchasing the easement. This should process should involve the partner(s) that are producers and interested in selling an easement, and would serve as an example of success in conversations with the community.

Language around management plans for the Reserves once they're acquired needs to be added to 1.4.5. Rebecca Currin notes that permanent easements should count toward recovery. There also need to be meetings specific to purchases and prioritization. Next year's WG could start with a framing of terms so that there is no misunderstanding regarding terms and targets.

Outstanding questions:

- Marty Chaney: Would a wetland easement count as a prairie? There needs to be a place for gophers to disperse through.
- Emily Butler: What happens when you buy suitable habitat and then find that gophers don't utilize it?

1.5 For RRP and YPG, implement the Conservation Crediting Program and the Mission Sustainment Programmatic Biological Opinion to off-set the effects of military training.

1.6 Monitor implementation of habitat protection activities for MPG conservation (e.g., set-asides, mitigation banks, EQIP).

Language regarding the role of set-asides needs to be updated. Zach Radmer mentions that conservation plans already have conservation performance criteria; no tasks left for the group to do surrounding that. Elspeth Kim suggests that set-asides could be reviewed in a subsequent discussion.

RECOVERY ACTION 2: Identify MPG limiting factors and sources of mortality or harm, and implement best management practices to minimize impacts.

2.1 Evaluate the effects of actions that affect vegetation on MPGs and their habitat.

This section consists of the greatest number of outstanding and/ongoing questions and activities. The impact on demographics should be kept broad, rather than specifying abundance, occupancy, or other more detailed terms.

Rebecca Currin wonders if we have a written compilation of everything we currently know about this aspect of gopher biology. There is no current centralized repository aside from what's found in WDFW's status assessment, and the USFWS's Species Biological Report; as far as our local gophers are concerned, almost all information is anecdotal. In terms of tools or resources needed, Marty Chaney notes it would be useful to compile a guide of technical notes to share with both existing working group members and those new to the group.

Bill Kronland notes that the bridges between demographics and habitat management haven't been connected. Adam Martin notes it would be good to know what the targets for gopher food are—e.g., grasses vs forbs, and the associated percentages. The USFWS' MPG Recovery Plan includes that information in Appendix A.

JBLM needs to be added to the column of implementing parties.

2.2 Determine if and how translocated populations within the range of TPG are affecting demographic and genetic characteristics of this subspecies; develop solutions if needed.

Sarah Hamman asks what subspecies have been translocated into the range of TPG. Answer: YPG and OPG were translocated into Wolf Haven, and OPG were translocated into West Rocky Prairie WLA. All of those moves were made prior to the federal listing. No individuals within the TPG subspecies have been moved anywhere.

Elsbeth Kim asks if 2.2 considers an urgent question that impacts priority recovery actions. Kim Flotlin answers that it is potentially urgent for TPG, but not for the species as a whole. Still, the sooner it can be addressed the better. Zach Radmer notes the genetic component is not currently at the forefront of action.

2.3 Identify landscape features that influence MPG dispersal and distribution.

Doesn't rank as high as other activities, but shouldn't be removed.

2.4 Evaluate impacts of other anthropogenic stressors affecting MPGs (e.g., cats, dogs, recreational uses, etc.)

Recreation and its associated impacts could be an issue at Scatter Creek; Bill Kronland notes that dogs should be kept on leash unless working. Kim Flotlin says more research on the impacts of dogs on local gopher populations where recreation is occurring is needed. Scatter Creek WLA (units North and South) were established using certain pots of money that would disallow WDFW from eliminating all impactful recreation, but it's possible some types of recreation could be reduced or eliminated. Another option would be more frequent enforcement of the leash law. This would be something only WDFW could potentially change. Christa Rolls suggests that current research can be compiled and evaluated. Sarah Hamman states there would still be a lot of community pushback. Bill mentions that a larger internal WDFW discussion is needed to brainstorm incentives as well as the language for the rule to differentiate between off-leash working and recreational dogs. Some JBLM lands also allow hunt dog training, and undoubtedly some people let their dogs off leash on some JBLM lands.

2.5 Evaluate natural factors affecting population health and distribution within and between sites.

Marty Chaney suggests we need to figure out the characteristics of gopher soil, rather than relying on its name.

2.6 Conduct demographic and genetic studies.

Kim Flotlin mentions that USFWS might not need further studies, but that the activity could be added to 2.2 to better understand TPG delineation in particular. Christa Rolls says that WDFW already has an understanding of MPG genetic delineation.

Anita Michalak says that the language could be amended so that it doesn't just pertain to questions of population structure/delineation of units. More genetic studies could be conducted to better understand gene flow, what populations make up the best sources and sinks for translocation, what the effective population size of a certain population is, etc. There is potential to use genetic data to address many questions.

Determining population vital rates is important and should be kept at current ranking or even increased.

2.7 Revise PVA when new genetic or demographic information becomes available.

2.8 (renumbered from 2.9) Develop and implement best management practices to avoid and minimize effects of activities in occupied MPG habitat.

Fire is the only currently known event that requires a BMP but doesn't currently have one.

RECOVERY ACTION 3: To achieve reserve targets for each subspecies, evaluate the species' biological need to either create new local populations or increase the number of existing local populations within each recovery area or recovery unit. If biologically needed, create new local populations or increase current local population sizes through habitat creation and population augmentation. Monitor reserves as needed to determine status and trend prior to final monitoring requirements in Common Criterion 2.

General discussion:

- There is no urgent priority for Recovery Action 3 to be discussed outside of internal discussion.
- Other partners should be added to 3.5 – 3.7.

3.1 Evaluate the range-wide biological need to increase the number of populations.

3.2 Evaluate the range-wide biological need to augment existing populations.

3.3 If biologically needed (as determined in 3.1 or 3.2), evaluate and modify methods of captive breeding, handling, transport, and translocation.

3.4 If biologically needed, identify source populations for captive breeding or translocation.

3.5 If biologically needed, develop and test best practices for habitat expansion.

3.6 If biologically needed, evaluate sites for suitability and prioritize for habitat expansion.

3.7 If biologically needed, evaluate sites for suitability (including genetic appropriateness, habitat quality, threats, and other factors) and prioritize sites for translocation.

3.8 If translocation or habitat expansion is biologically justified, evaluate legal aspects and complete compliance analysis and documentation (permitting, NEPA, etc.).

3.9 If biologically needed and appropriate, establish additional populations within unoccupied areas of the historical range.

3.10 If biologically needed and appropriate, implement and monitor habitat expansion through vegetation manipulation (tree and shrub removal, mowing, restoration, grazing, etc.).

3.11 Monitor population status, trend, and distribution prior to final monitoring requirements in Common Criteria 2.
WDFW has almost completed their activities for 3.11.

Bill Kronland asks what level of resolution for occupancy data is needed. Kim Flotlin responds that 25x25 m grids were previously used at Mazama Meadows. Rebecca Currin mentions there is no current protocol for mapping

distribution. For 3.11.2.2 and 3.11.2.3, change “distribution” to “abundance” and mention that drones can be used to assist with monitoring efforts.

RECOVERY ACTION 4: Strengthen outreach and cooperation with stakeholders and partner agencies.

General discussion:

- Engagement with tribal partners should apply to all WG documents but is not currently listed on any—needs to be added.

4.1 Facilitate coordination and information sharing.

Anita Michalak suggests creating a pre-meeting survey for folks to have a chance to review the RIS on their own time and make educated votes regarding the prioritization of actions. Bill Kronland suggests reformatting the RIS into an Action Plan with specific action points that could be checked off as progress is made. It would also be useful to have an excel sheet/checklist of all the lands that have management plans and/or CEs.

4.2 Implement outreach and education.

RECOVERY ACTION 5: Monitor subspecies population status and trend biennially to determine if population goals required in Common Criterion 2 have been met.

RECOVERY ACTION 6: Develop and implement a post-delisting monitoring program.