2025 Mazama Pocket Gopher Working Group

Updates & Meeting Minutes

Date:	16 December 2025
Location:	USFWS Lacey Office
Notetaker:	Kyra Morrill, Ecostudies Institute

Text in boxes was provided as a written update.

Attendees

Center for Natural Lands Management (CNLM): Sanders Freed
Ecostudies Institute (ESI): Sarah Hamman, Elspeth Kim, Kyra Morrill, Anita Michalak, Cindy Nguyen
JBLM: Sean Callahan
JBLM Fish and Wildlife: Timothy Leque, Jim Lynch, Gina Smith
JBLM ITAM: Sally Jones, Leif Wefferling
JBLM Sentinel Landscapes: Dan Calvert, Naomi Gebo
Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): Marty Chaney, Tara Donohoe, Audrey Mechtenberg, Alexander Wyatt
Thurston County: Marisa Whisman
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW): Emily Butler, Taylor Cotten, Erica Henry, Bill Kronland, Christa LeGrande, Allison Leipold, Eszter Munes, Coral Pasi, Abby Sage, Lindsay Shulock, Julia Smith, Michelle Tirhi
Washington Department of Natural Resources (WDNR): Dave Wilderman
Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT): Kimberly Toal
US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS): Marty Acker, Erin Adams, Jose Carranza, Rebecca Currin, Erin Gray, Zach Radmer
US Geological Survey (USGS): Joseph Benjamin

General Updates

Federal Update – Zach Radmer (USFWS) ***Recovery Activities: 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6, 2.1***

- USFWS wrote a 5-year review for the 4 listed MPG subspecies, which is available here and can also be found on the ECOS page of all listed subspecies, e.g. OPG: Species Profile for Olympia pocket gopher.
- USFWS passed funding from DOD onto Texas A&M Natural Resource Institute to evaluate the use of drones to monitor RPPG in the Artillery Impact Area. Work is likely to begin next field season.
- Bush Prairie HCP and Yelm HCP are still in development.

Washington State Update – Christa LeGrande (WDFW) ***Recovery Activities: 1.1, 1.4, 1.6, 3.11***

The WDFW abundance survey protocol will be finalized in 2026. Survey methods were further refined for the 2025 season, specifically, the age of gopher mounds incorporated into the model for analysis was increased from three days to five days.

WDFW conducted abundance surveys at Scatter Creek North, West Rocky Prairie, and Wolf Haven and general presence surveys (with no mound detections) at Bremerton Airport as part of a SEPA request. Abundance estimate results will be analyzed in winter 25/26. Given the rainier fall weather in 2025 and the abundance protocol requirement to wait a minimum of three days post-rain to survey for mounds, other planned survey sites (e.g., Scatter Creek South) were not visited. A report on surveyed sites with abundance estimates to-date was published in mid-2025. A similar report on 2025 survey sites will be written post-analysis in winter 25/56.

WDFW is drafting a formal monitoring plan to inform future reserve monitoring per the state and federal recovery plans. Specified sites that meet criteria for reserve status will be surveyed for abundance on a rotational basis. WDFW is also planning to update the Mazama pocket gopher Periodic Status Review in late 2026.

Additional Updates

- WDFW: Abundance data from JBLM and other sites will be summarized in reports and sent out in the next few months.
- WDFW: This year's abundance survey results will be displayed in table estimates with credible intervals. Some locations had presence, but not enough to measure abundance. This year's findings may inform future management goals like linking currently disconnected populations. There is also work being done to determine what habitat quality metrics can be used to inform what quality gopher habitat looks like. This information could direct us in meeting conservation plan goals.

Survey & Monitoring Updates

WDFW Survey Updates – Christa LeGrande (WDFW)

- WDFW abundance results from this year will contribute toward informing future management goals including increasing connectivity between MPG areas and populations.
- Yelm South is the furthest along in meeting Recovery Plan objectives.
- Tenino and Yelm North both require more creativity to meet recovery objectives.

JBLM Survey Updates – Tim Leque (JBLM) ***Recovery Activities: 3.11***

Occupancy Surveys
One occupancy survey was completed across 25 acres in Training Area 10 (Zuke Prairie). No evidence of Mazama pocket gopher occupancy was detected.

Abundance Surveys
This was the second year of abundance surveys on JBLM, and surveys were completed across 881 acres. Surveys all occurred in the month of October and during the government shutdown. Surveys were primarily completed by Ecostudies Institute and Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands with help from WDFW in the SIA. Due to the government shutdown, a large training event in the AIA, and frequent rain, JBLM did not survey as many areas as we would have liked.

2025 Abundance Survey Locations on JBLM (RPPG)
- Training Area 18 (Marion Prairie)
- Training Area 06 (Ponderosa Pine Area)
- Training Areas 4 & 5 (Scout's Out)
- South Impact Area (Eastern Half)

- Low densities were recorded in TAs 4, 5, and 6.
- Issues with weather windows, access, and federal shutdown led to only achieving ~50% of intended effort. Will work more closely with training schedulers to increase access during October timeframe in 2026.

Additional Discussion

- Gina suggests collaborating to sync timing of Prairie Habitat Monitoring data with MPG data (within 1-2 years) to better understand how gopher occupancy is influenced by vegetation makeup. It may also be helpful to come up with a framework for looking at the impact of recent intense management actions (burning, mowing, etc.) on MPG occupancy and abundance.
- UW is working on MPG habitat modeling off-base; could be a potential way for partners to compile all information on gopher detections and be an opportunity to refine spatial extent of occupancy data (polygons rather than points).

Regulatory Protection Strategies

Army REPI Update – Dan Calvert (Sentinel Landscapes)

- 2025 was a record burn year for off-base sites.
- REPI yearly review: CNLM has submitted RTPs for an endowment for Tenalquot, and support for the native seed farm. Appraisals for other REPI projects under administrative review.
- Have made additional REPI fund requests for grassland easements on sites around JBLM.
- Current focus on strategic collaboration with private landowners; looking ahead to potential larger acquisitions in the South Sound.
- To be developed: REPI project prioritization process to streamline identifying potential projects and integrating them into our work.
- If you have a research project or some other opportunity that needs funding, REPI is a great option. Projects that are appropriate for REPI must align with the management goals of Sentinel Landscapes.

Thurston County/HCP Updates – Marisa Whisman (Thurston County) ***Recovery Activities: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.6, 4.2***

In 2025, Thurston County completed the third year of HCP implementation. While the County continues to acquire land for the HCP conservation land system, other items are in-progress. The following activities took place or are ongoing:

- Establishment of endowments for conservation lands – confirming that available conservation easement holders can hold easement-enforcement endowments in accordance with the HCP requirements; and developing the means for the County to act as the non-wasting stewardship endowment holder.
- Non-wasting stewardship endowments should be put in place prior to completion of conservation easements and start of restoration efforts.
- Baseline monitoring and baseline credit assessments have now been completed for 5 conservation sites.
- Site management plans have been completed for 2 conservation sites, with one in-progress.
- Scotch broom treatment was carried out for Violet Prairie East site, and conservation grazing efforts used in lieu of mowing.
- WSU Extension continued conservation grazing studies and carried out patch seeding at the Early Blue Violet Demonstration site.
- Due to a lack of interested conservation grazers, the Sagewood (Century Preserve) OSF site was mowed rather than grazed prior to the wet season.
- The HCP Year 3 Annual Report is being drafted.
- The County has been in conversation with Agency and NCO partners about kicking off the HCP Implementation Team in Q1 2026.

New HCP land acquisitions have taken place:

- A 6.98-acre OPG site
- A 5-acre YPG E site adjacent to Upper Weir Prairie
- A 9.1-acre YPG S site adjacent to Mazama Meadows

Potential upcoming HCP land acquisitions:

- Three YPG S properties totaling ~159 acres, the PSA has been published in local papers for one site
- Conversations are in-progress for a YPG N property (~40 acres)

Additional Discussion

- Sarah says the Southwest Washington Grazing Association hosts events at Early Blue Violet Prairie every month with education opportunities teaching rotational grazing and providing land access to ranchers. These short-term grazing leases provide a patchwork of suitable land for ranchers that prevents overgrazing and provides conservation benefits on another parcel. This means having multiple properties throughout the year for one rancher.

Gopher Translocation Discussion

The current strategy to recover gophers does not include conducting translocations. This has come up at a few meetings in the past year and so Anita/Elspeth brought it up to provide an opportunity for folks to raise their questions, concerns, or potential opportunities if translocations were feasible in the future, as well as to remind folks why translocations are not currently occurring.

- Sanders: Cavness is not currently occupied by gophers, but there is potential for moving them in, especially with occupancy nearby at Colvin. Gopher recovery here could be potentially 180 ac of credit for JBLM.
- Zach: FWS/Forest Service is not investing resources into this right now as translocation efforts are focused on other species. This would be a hail mary effort if things get worse down the line. Glacial/Mima complex has potential for being a translocation site for OPG in the future, as a last resort. Bill suggests Olympia Airport as a possible source site.
- Christa: There's a danger with setting a precedent of emergency relocations rather than first working on site recovery that would be more appropriate. There are many unanswered, underlying questions regarding methodologies, survival, source population etc. If people have specific translocation goals that are filing conservation 'holes' then that's a great thing to explore, but we should try to think about it strategically.
- Julia: Re-iterating that (emergency) translocation is a false solution. WDFW is often contacted by contractors who want a quick 'fix' but moving animals is the last resort. They just die trying to go back, there's no resources to track how they do afterward.
- Zach: The issue isn't that we're running out of PGs, it's that we're running out of land.
- Michele proposes another meeting on this topic, where all partners work together to lay out what a successful translocation looks like, with associated costs, so that people can see how realistic it is.
- Tara proposed creating outreach documents to give to private landowners that explain the importance of MPG surveying for conservation, and highlight incentives for them to participate. Want to focus on finding as much occupancy as possible on new sites.

Managing, Enhancing, and Maintaining Habitat

CNLM Habitat Management Updates – Sanders Freed (CNLM)

- Continued management actions are managing exotic grass, killing scotch broom, burning, and seeding natives.
- WDFW Abundance surveys conducted at Tenalquot, Tumwater West, and Lightner.
- Wolf Haven has high occupancy and was included in abundance estimate.
- Violet Prairie occupancy is slowly increasing.
- Deschutes has occupancy, but not enough to warrant abundance estimate in 2025. Surveys this year showed significant mounding on this site south of Chehalis Western Trail.
- Century preserve has occupancy on northern boundary despite thick vegetation.

WDFW Habitat Management Updates – Bill Kronland (WDFW)

- 110 acres across 3 sites burned this year, all of which have gopher presence. Almost all acreage has been seeded or plugged this fall, with the goal of diversifying plant functional groups and phenology while controlling tall oat grass.
- Winter grazing plans on Violet Prairie are in the works. Plans to graze ~60 acres on the preserve to see how camas responds in comparison to burned units. Hopefully these areas will be monitored Spring 2026.
- Areas of oak were released from conifer encroachment on West Rocky and Scatter Creek, and gophers are already moving into these areas. Planning to burn these areas to encourage further spread.

WDNR Habitat Management Updates – Dave Wilderman (WDNR)

- Gopher presence at Rocky Prairie, where invasive species control targeting exotic grasses and hawkweed continues. 6 acres burned in 2025 for first time in 9 years, with invasive control and follow-up seeding and planting this fall. Continuing to see mounds, but no formal monitoring.
- Continued restoration at Mima – no gophers there yet.

JBLM Habitat Restoration Updates – Gina Smith (JBLM) ***Recovery Activities: 1.4***

Mazama pocket gopher habitat restoration activities on Joint Base Lewis-McChord in 2025 occurred in TA 06, Marion Prairie, The Weirs, Johnson Prairie, and South Weir. In these Training Areas, we burned a total of 367 acres, sprayed over 300 acres of Scotch broom and exotic perennial and annual grasses, seeded 450lbs of native grasses and forbs across 289 acres, and planted 2,679 plugs.

Training Area	Rx fire acres	Herbicide acres	Seeding acres	Forb seed lbs	Grass seed lbs	Plugs planted
Training Area 6	170	40	90	14	115	686
Training Area 18 (Marion)	21	0	0	0	0	0
Training Area 21 (The Weirs)	98	146	131	28	254	0
Training Area 22 (Johnson)	71	120	68	33	6	1,993
Training Area 23 (South Weir)	9	0	0	0	0	0
Total	**367**	**306**	**289**	**75**	**375**	**2,679**

ITAM Rehabilitation in Mazama Pocket Gopher Habitat:

- 26.59 lbs of seeds
- 2231 plugs

Seeding and planting occurred in Training Area 06, Training Area 22, and the Artillery Impact Area.

Additional Discussion

- Michele mentions we should consider how we can "grow crops and grow gophers," maybe through soil management. Could be a research project.
- Christa adds that we should explore: 1) what ag activities are compatible on gopher-occupied sites, and 2) can those places that have those activities be appropriately designated as reserve locations?
- Sarah agrees that it would be great to design a study that answers questions about the relationship between conservation grazing, plant growth, and gopher survivability.
- Christa asks if there are untouched parts of the RIS that we might want to focus on in the next couple of years.
- Marty wonders if there are alternative RPAs (Reserved Priority Area) options in the Yelm area.
- Christa: Though the priority for HCP is that site acquisition is within historic subspecies boundaries, if there are acquisitions outside RPAs, those are still on the table and we can be flexible to boundaries shifting.
- Tara announces that the WA state fund pool for Sentinel Landscapes was discontinued last year by NRCS management. Moving forward, there is still money for EQUIP and CSP for habitat restoration + grazing improvements.

Next Steps

- Develop outreach materials for private landowners to educate them on MPGs and incentives for participating in conservation efforts.
- Plan next year's meeting – overall preference toward December and January.

Mazama Pocket Gopher Action Plan Summary

Activities in gray not currently active.

Recovery Action 1: Protect, conserve, and enhance MPG habitat

Activity 1.1: Identify and prioritize the creation and protection of Reserves.

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

Activity 1.3: Implement other short- and long-term strategies to protect Reserves and other important MPG sites from development pressure.

Activity 1.4: Develop and implement programs for the protection and conservation of MPGs, SPS prairies, oak savannah, and other prairie-dependent species.

Activity 1.5: For Roy Prairie and Yelm PG, implement the Conservation Crediting Program and the Mission Sustainment Programmatic Biological Opinion to offset the effects of military training.

Activity 1.6: Monitor implementation of habitat protection activities for MPG conservation.

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

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

Activity 2.2: Determine if/how translocated populations within the range of the Tenino PG are affecting demographic and genetic characteristics of the subspecies.

Activity 2.3: Identify landscape features that influence MPG dispersal and distribution.

Activity 2.4: Evaluate impacts of other anthropogenic stressors affecting MPG.

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

Activity 2.6: Conduct demographic and genetic studies.

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

Activity 2.8: Develop and implement best management practices to avoid and minimize the effects of activities in occupied MPG habitat.

Recovery Action 3: Evaluate the species' biological need to either create new local populations or increase the number of individuals in existing local populations within each Recovery Area/Unit

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

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

Activity 3.3: If biologically needed, evaluate and modify methods of captive breeding, handling, transport, and translocation.

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

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

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

Activity 3.7: If biologically needed, evaluate sites for suitability and prioritize sites for translocation.

Activity 3.8: If translocation or habitat expansion is biologically justified, evaluate legal aspects and complete compliance analysis and documentation.

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

Activity 3.10: If biologically needed, implement and monitor habitat expansion through vegetation manipulation.

Activity 3.11: Monitor population status, trend, and distribution prior to final monitoring requirements in Common Criteria 2.

Recovery Action 4: Strengthen outreach and cooperation with stakeholders and partner agencies

Activity 4.1: Facilitate coordination and information sharing.

Activity 4.2: Implement outreach and education.

Recovery Action 5: Monitor subspecies population status and trend biennially to determine if population goals have been met

Recovery Action 6: Develop and implement a post-delisting monitoring program

Activity 6.1: Evaluate monitoring to determine appropriate frequency and sampling framework.

Activity 6.2: Conduct monitoring.

Activity 6.3: Evaluate abundance and trends.