

COSTS AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF PUBLIC RECREATION AND HABITAT LANDS

SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

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STATE OF WASHINGTON
JOINT LEGISLATIVE AUDIT AND
REVIEW COMMITTEE

STUDY TEAM

Rebecca Connolly
Stephanie Hoffman
Ryan McCord

PROJECT SUPERVISOR

John Woolley

LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR

Keenan Konopaski

Joint Legislative Audit &
Review Committee
1300 Quince St SE
Olympia, WA 98504-0910
(360) 786-5171
(360) 786-5180 Fax

Website:

www.jlarc.leg.wa.gov
e-mail: JLARC@leg.wa.gov

Why a JLARC Study of Public Recreation and Habitat Lands?

In the 2013-15 Capital Budget (ESSB 5035), the Legislature directed the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee (JLARC) to conduct a study of public recreation and habitat lands that would describe the characteristics and costs of recent acquisitions, evaluate cost and benefit measures for these lands, and address potential effects of these lands on county economic vitality.

State Agencies Acquire These Lands with Different Funds and for Different Purposes

Much of the Legislature's assignment focuses on lands acquired by three state agencies: the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the State Parks and Recreation Commission (Parks), and the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). State law authorizes these agencies to acquire land for recreation or habitat. The departments fund many of these acquisitions with state grants, federal grants, or direct capital budget appropriations. Agencies also acquire property through donations, exchanges, and land transfers. The fund source may restrict how recipients can use the money or land.

The **Department of Natural Resources** manages lands that produce income for schools, local services, and other purposes. Many of these sites offer recreational opportunities such as campgrounds and trails. Statute also authorizes DNR to establish natural area preserves and natural resource conservation areas to protect habitat, native ecosystems, and rare species.

The **Department of Fish and Wildlife** has statutory duties to protect fish, wildlife, and habitat and to provide hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities. WDFW manages land for plant and animal habitat; some areas are also open to hunting, hiking, and other recreation. WDFW's water access sites provide opportunities for activities such as fishing and boating.

The **State Parks and Recreation Commission** has a statutory duty to manage lands set aside for parks. This includes developed parks, heritage sites, interpretive centers, and historic structures. Many properties also provide habitat for plants and animals.

Public Habitat and Recreation Lands May Affect County Economic Vitality

State, federal, local, and tribal governments own land in Washington counties. Use of these lands for habitat or recreation may affect a county's economic vitality. The Recreation and Conservation Office completed two studies of these lands in 2005, offering a framework to identify economic impacts. Since then, the Legislature has requested additional reviews of public recreation and habitat lands and their effect on county property taxes. This study will look broadly at impacts to county economic vitality and will consider changes in addition to property taxes.

Study Scope

JLARC staff will create an inventory of the recreation and habitat acquisitions made by DNR, WDFW, and Parks over the last ten years, including land characteristics and associated costs. The study also will identify recent trust land acquisitions on which DNR provides or plans to provide recreation. JLARC staff will work with natural resource economists to evaluate the measures used to estimate benefits and costs, and to identify mechanisms to estimate the impact of public recreation and habitat lands on the economic vitality of Washington's counties.

Study Objectives

This study will address the following questions by January 2015:

- 1) What recreation and habitat lands have the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the State Parks and Recreation Commission acquired over the past ten years?
- 2) What is the current use of these lands? How does the current use compare to the intended use? What are the estimated costs to bring these lands to the intended uses?
- 3) How much do the agencies spend to manage recreation and habitat lands?
- 4) Are there best practices for estimating economic benefits and costs of recreation and habitat lands?
- 5) What measures and techniques do state and federal agencies use to estimate the economic benefits and costs of recreation and habitat lands? How do those measures compare with best practices?
- 6) What are the estimated acres of recreation, habitat, and other land owned by federal, state, tribal, and local governments in each of Washington's counties?

In addition, the study will address this question by April 2015:

- 7) How can the Legislature reliably estimate the impact to a county's economic vitality from an incremental change in recreation or habitat land, when considered with other county characteristics?

Timeframe for the Study

Staff will present preliminary reports in January 2015 and April 2015, as described above. Staff will present a final report in May 2015.

JLARC Staff Contact for the Study

Rebecca Connolly (360) 786-5175 rebecca.connolly@leg.wa.gov
Stephanie Hoffman (360) 786-5297 stephanie.hoffman@leg.wa.gov
Ryan McCord (360) 786-5186 ryan.mccord@leg.wa.gov

