



COMMUNITY PLANNING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Website: ThurstonCPED.org

Creating Solutions for Our Future

Ashley Arai, Director

TO: Thurston County Planning Commission

FROM: Claire Swearingen, Associate Planner

DATE: May 6, 2026

SUBJECT: Terrestrial Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas

Introduction

Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas (FWHCAs) are various parts of the environment that provide habitat for animals and plants, and for which protection is mandated by state laws addressing critical areas. WAC 365-190-030 defines FWHCAs as follows:

“Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas’ are areas that serve a critical role in sustaining needed habitats and species for the functional integrity of the ecosystem, and which, if altered, may reduce the likelihood that the species will persist over the long term. These areas may include, but are not limited to, rare or vulnerable ecological systems, communities, and habitat or habitat elements including seasonal ranges, breeding habitat, winter range, and movement corridors; and areas with high relative population density or species richness. Counties and cities may also designate locally important habitats and species.

‘Habitats of local importance’ designated as fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas include those areas found to be locally important by counties and cities.

‘Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas’ does not include such artificial features or constructs as irrigation delivery systems, irrigation infrastructure, irrigation canals, or drainage ditches that lie within the boundaries of, and are maintained by, a port district or an irrigation district or company.”

FWHCAs generally protect the habitats and species on the [Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife’s \(WDFW\) Priority Habitats and Species List](#). This list, which includes federally listed species, includes habitats, fishes, mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrates that need protection in Washington state. Thurston County is home to 97 of these priority habitats and species, though some of these inhabit Puget Sound, so the Critical Areas Ordinance is not as central to their protection. In addition, the four federally listed species that are covered by the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) (Mazama Pocket Gopher, Oregon Spotted Frog, Taylor’s Checkerspot Butterfly and Vesper Sparrow) are managed only by the HCP. The CAO defers to the HCP for these species, though prairie habitat that supports other State-listed species is still covered by the CAO.

While many designated FWHCAs are aquatic or riparian in nature, Thurston County is also home to many rare or threatened terrestrial species. Some of Thurston County’s protected terrestrial habitats



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include aspen stands, herbaceous balds, old growth forest, Oregon White Oak woodlands, westside prairie, and talus biomes. Sometimes, individual features are listed as protected, and some of these include snags and logs, caves, and cliffs.

Functions and Values

Prairies, Savannahs, and Grasslands

Prairie, savannah, and grasslands environments are unique in western Washington because they are dominated by grasses, flowers, and shrubs rather than trees or forested areas. Some of these areas may be home to trees like the Oregon White Oak, which is a State-listed species. Prairies used to be a more dominant feature of the landscape that is now Thurston County, and they were managed with fire from time immemorial as important food systems by local indigenous peoples. Prairies support many species, including some federally threatened and endangered HCP species and State-listed PHS species, that cannot thrive in the Douglas Fir-dominated forests that have encroached prairies since the arrival of European settlers. Prairies have become seriously threatened in Thurston County due to the removal of indigenous peoples and management practices and the introduction of development and land uses that have fragmented prairies systems, and prairie restoration is needed to support rare and declining plants, mammals, birds, and insects. Prairies are a key part of the historical and cultural identity of Thurston County. Prairies also act as effective, fire-resistant carbon sinks, storing carbon in root systems underground and reducing greenhouse gas effects.

Oregon White Oaks

Oregon white oak trees support threatened mammals like the Western Gray Squirrel, provide important nesting habitat for many birds, provide food to a variety of species with their acorns, and provide shade and refuge to many threatened and endangered species. Oregon White Oaks are particularly important in savannah areas where they may be some of the only large trees available.

Stands and Forests

Forested areas provide many habitat functions, providing shade, shelter, and food to many local species. Forests also interact with other kinds of habitat, like riparian and aquatic habitats, as was discussed in the previous planning commission session. Forests help or reduce and mitigate the effect of climate change by providing shade, reducing air and water temperatures, and sequestering carbon. Stands of trees like Oregon White Oaks can act as transition areas between prairies and forests, and stands of trees can act as more functionally dense areas of habitat for tree reliant species.

Climate Change and Human Impact

As discussed above, prairie and savannah habitats have become threatened as a result of European colonization in the region, and the loss and destruction of indigenous land management practices, which include controlled burning. Human development and harmful activity in habitats has contributed to major habitat loss in the region, and this has resulted in the decline of state and federally listed species.

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Non-native plant species introduced through human introduction can also threaten native prairie plants. Maintaining healthy forests and prairies can help to combat the impacts of climate change through carbon sequestration, and can support the health of native species.

Protection Strategies

Because terrestrial FWHCA's are so diverse, the strategies used to protect and enhance them are also varied. In developing code, it is necessary to identify what features and data sets can indicate the potential presence of areas to be protected. Like with other chapters, this data should be clear and easy for the public to access, and clearly identified in code. Once critical areas are designated, development in these areas should follow the standard mitigation sequence of avoidance, minimization, then mitigation. After avoidance and minimization are established, mitigation could include best management practices, restoration, or mitigation banking with impact fees. A mitigation banking program could utilize land that has already been acquired to protect HCP species.

Discussion

- Are there any habitats or species that should be considered as additional habitats or species of local importance? See [TCC Table 24.25-4](#) for the current list.
- Are there any new or emerging land uses that should be taken into consideration?
- What kinds of best management practices or restoration activities should be encouraged or required?
- How can the code help facilitate restorative activities?
- How can connectivity be considered or prioritized?