

Proposed Changes to the Salmon Recovery Grant Program

Background

The Salmon Recovery Funding Board (board) is considering whether to implement guidelines for minimum buffer widths for projects with a specific objective to improve riparian habitat. The board would like input on the proposal before making a decision.

How to Comment

Public comments on the proposed changes are being accepted through Wednesday, April 30, 2014. Send comments to policychanges@rco.wa.gov or to ask questions. Please include in the subject line the following text: **SRFB riparian guideline comments**.

Definition of Riparian Project

Riparian projects are projects implemented above the ordinary high water mark and within the floodplain of streams that improve the environmental conditions necessary to sustain salmonids throughout their life cycle¹. The proposed guidelines under consideration would be applied to riparian projects that include riparian planting as a primary habitat objective.

The guidelines would not apply to projects that conduct plantings to mitigate for construction impacts at other projects such as levee setbacks, fish passages or in-stream improvements.

Proposed Changes for Public Comment

The proposal is outlined below in four parts in a question/answer format. Please respond to the questions as directly as possible. Other comments are welcome and should be provided separately from your answer to the questions.

Question 1 - Should the board adopt guidelines for minimum buffer widths for projects with a specific objective to improve riparian habitat? If yes, should the guidelines apply to Puget Sound only, western Washington only, or statewide?

The guidelines under consideration are presented in Table 1 below.

¹ Definition of riparian projects for SRFB grants.

Table 1: Proposed Minimum Riparian Buffer Width Guidelines for Riparian Habitat Projects

Category	Functions	Minimum Buffer Width West of Cascades	Minimum Buffer Width East of Cascades
A. Constructed ditches, intermittent streams, and ephemeral streams that are not identified as being accessed and were historically not accessed by anadromous or Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed fish species	Water quality, shade, source control and delivery reduction	35' minimum	35' minimum
B. Perennial waters that are not identified as being accessed and were historically not accessed by anadromous or ESA listed fish species	Water quality, shade, source control, and delivery reduction	50' minimum	50' minimum
C. Perennial, intermittent, and ephemeral waters that are identified as being accessed or were historically accessed by anadromous or ESA listed fish species	Water quality, large wood debris for cover, complexity and shade, and microclimate cooling, source control and delivery reduction	100' minimum	75' minimum
D. Intertidal and estuarine streams and channels that are identified as being accessed or were historically accessed by anadromous or ESA listed fish species	Water quality, habitat complexity	35'-75' minimum, or more as necessary to meet water quality standards	N/A

Table reflects NOAA Fisheries Interim Riparian Buffer Recommendations for Streams in Puget Sound Agricultural Landscapes (December 2013) and Minimum Buffer Requirements for Surface Waters for Grants Awarded through the Washington State Department of Ecology for Nonpoint Source Pollution (October 2013).

Question 2 - What constraints would be reasonable justification for smaller riparian habitat buffers that are less than the guidelines?

If a proposed riparian project is not designed to meet the minimum buffer widths in the guidelines in Table 1, the applicant would be required to provide a written justification with the grant application as to why the proposal is for a smaller buffer. The written justification would document how the smaller buffer will improve the environmental conditions necessary to sustain salmonids throughout their life cycle and describe the constraints that prohibit achieving the adopted guideline for the stream type where the proposal is located.

Examples of reasonable constraints may include:

- Transportation corridors such as roads or bridges,
- Structures such as homes, barns, or sheds,
- Naturally occurring conditions such as geology and soil types, or

- If the guidelines would lead to declassification of the land as farmland as defined in the state's Open Space Act (RCW 84.34.020).

Review Process

Applications with buffer widths smaller than the guidelines would remain eligible for grant funding. The application, including the written justification for the smaller buffer, would be reviewed by the board's technical review panel in the approved application review process for the grant cycle. If the technical review panel finds a lack of support for the smaller buffer; it may deem the application a project of concern. Applications that are projects of concern remain on the funding list provided to the board. The board would consider whether to fund the application at the funding meeting.

Question 3 - What types of conservation incentives should be offered to landowners who allow salmon recovery projects on their property? Which types of incentives should be eligible for salmon recovery funding through the Salmon Recovery Funding Board?

The board allows project sponsors to acquire riparian conservation easements in perpetuity to provide compensation to landowners who voluntarily allow their property to be used for salmon recovery projects. Restoration projects are required to be maintained for ten years after the project is complete.

What are conservation incentives²?

Conservation incentives are inducements offered by government or private providers to encourage private landowners to undertake voluntary conservation actions on their property. There are six basic categories of incentives:

- Financial assistance: grant, loan, and lease programs that provide cost-share funding for, or reduce expenses of, conservation actions,
- Technical assistance: advice, hand-on help, and training for landowners on conservation tools or techniques,
- Tax relief: tax reductions for landowners undertaking conservation actions,
- Marketing: programs to add market value to products that support conservation on private land,
- Recognition: identification and promotion of landowners undertaking conservation actions, and
- Conservation banking: financial assistance to landowners provided as a condition of permitting for construction projects.

² Adapted from *Conservation Incentive Programs in Washington State: Trends, Gaps, and Opportunities* Prepared for the Washington Biodiversity Council By Evergreen Funding Consultants

Question 4 - Should the board encourage prioritizing funding for riparian habitat projects that meet the guidelines? If so, how could the board encourage such prioritization at the local, regional or state level?

The board gives preference to funding certain types of projects through its eligibility and evaluation criteria as published in [Manual 18: Salmon Recovery Grants](#) and as required through statutory direction. Statutory requirements for awarding grants funds are outlined below.

Statutory Criteria³

In evaluating, ranking, and awarding funds for projects and activities the board must give preference to projects that:

- Are based upon the limiting factors analysis;
- Provide a greater benefit to salmon recovery based upon the stock status information contained in the Department of Fish and Wildlife’s salmonid stock inventory (SASSI), the salmon and steelhead habitat inventory and assessment project (SSHIAP), and any comparable science-based assessment when available;
- Will benefit listed species and other fish species;
- Will preserve high quality salmonid habitat;
- Are included in a regional or watershed-based salmon recovery plan that accords the project, action, or area a high priority for funding;
- Are sponsored by an entity that is a Puget Sound partner; and
- Are projects referenced in the action agenda developed by the Puget Sound Partnership under RCW 90.71.310.

In evaluating, ranking, and awarding funds for projects and activities the board shall also give consideration to projects that:

- Are the most cost-effective;
- Have the greatest matched or in-kind funding;
- Will be implemented by a sponsor with a successful record of project implementation;
- Involve members of the Washington Conservation Corps or the Veterans Conservation Corps established in RCW 43.60A.150; and
- Are part of a region wide list developed by lead entities.

Strategic Plan Link

The proposed changes reflect the opportunity to make policy improvements that support the board’s mission to provide funds to achieve overall salmon recovery, including habitat projects and other activities that result in sustainable and measurable benefits for salmon and other fish species.

The proposed changes also reflect the board’s goals to:

³ RCW 77.85.130

- Fund the best possible salmon recovery activities and projects through a fair process that considers science, community values and priorities, and coordination of efforts;
- Be accountable for board investments by promoting public oversight, effective projects, and actions that result in the economical and efficient use of resources; and
- Build understanding, acceptance, and support of salmon recovery efforts.

Next Steps

Comments received will be reviewed and included with a staff report to the board at its public meeting on June 4, 2014 in Olympia. When possible, the proposal will be revised to address the comments received. At that meeting, the board may approve the proposal as presented or direct staff to revise it based upon the comments received.