



March 20, 2025

Governor Bob Ferguson
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

By Email and U.S. Mail

Dear Governor Ferguson:

On behalf of the Washington Association of Fish and Wildlife Professionals (WAFWP), I am writing to ask you to appoint strong, independent, and qualified people to the Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) who are committed to improving workplace conditions and culture at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW).

WAFWP represents nearly 1,000 professional employees at WDFW, including biologists, fisheries specialists, habitat specialists, conflict specialists, and many other technical field staff. As you consider your appointments to the Commission, we urge you to keep the safety and welfare of these employees in mind, and to resist political pressure to subsume their interests to special interest demands.

WDFW management is failing its employees at the most fundamental level, and our members are literally paying for that failure with their lives. As I describe below, management's failures have led to two tragic employee deaths in the past 18 months, citations by the state Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) for the willful and continuing disregard for employee safety, and a report by the state Auditor highlighting intolerable working conditions that are rife with retaliation, bullying, discrimination, and unethical behavior.

We understand that you do not have the power to directly address these issues, because WDFW's system of governance does not give you authority over the director or control over how he runs the agency. However, you do have the authority to appoint strong, independent Commissioners who will take their oversight responsibilities seriously, and we ask you to exercise that authority in the best interests of both WDFW's employees and the state's fish and wildlife.

Commissioner Tim Ragen has stood out as one of the few Commissioners willing to take a stand for WDFW's employees, by specifically and regularly engaging with WAFWP. He has shown genuine concern about our safety and welfare, devoted the time necessary to understanding our issues, and actively worked to find pathways to improve our working conditions. WAFWP is



troubled by the possibility that Commissioner Ragen may not be reappointed to the Commission precisely because his courage in confronting these sorts of difficult and controversial situations has led to political criticism. **Our concerns are deepened by our fears that the people under consideration to replace him will be all too willing to serve as rubber stamps for agency management, continuing to look the other way as WDFW subjects its employees to hazardous and hostile working conditions without working with WAFWP.**

Agency's Willful Misconduct Leads to Two Employee Deaths

Over the past 18 months, WDFW has had four entirely preventable workplace accidents that resulted in the tragic deaths of two employees and the hospitalization of two others. These avoidable tragedies were a direct result of the unsafe working conditions and insufficient training that WAFWP has been asking the agency to correct for over a decade. Recognizing the severity of WDFW's transgressions, L&I cited WDFW for two "willful serious" and 10 "serious" violations¹ of state safety regulations and levied fines of more than \$230,000 (citations attached).

On September 13, 2023, 31-year-old fisheries biologist Erin Peterson became entrapped in Class IV rapids while doing a snorkel survey to count steelhead on a remote section of the Wind River in Skamania County. Erin fought to keep her head above water for an hour and a half before she passed out from hypothermia and drowned. She was working alone, without a life jacket, and without the benefit of any agency training on whitewater hazards or swift/cold water survival. Sadly, this was not the first fatality in this exact same river for WDFW.

Less than four months later, on January 25, 2024, 51-year-old scientific technician Mary Valentine drowned while working on a fish trap in the Duckabush River in Jefferson County. Mary was also working alone and without a life jacket, and in the words of her husband, had not received [safety training](#). Mary's death was not discovered until the following day, emphasizing the isolation of her work and the lack of basic safety protocols. In its report on the incident, L&I emphasized that WDFW's failure to provide sufficient training for working in dangerous environments subjected 250 employees to hazards that were "likely to lead to hospitalization, permanent disability or death."

¹ A "willful serious" citation refers to a violation where the employer knowingly and intentionally disregarded health and safety standards, despite the risk of death or serious physical harm.



The following month, a boat carrying two WDFW scientific technicians capsized as they were attempting to do maintenance work on a fish trap on the Nisqually River in Yelm, sending one employee to the hospital with a head injury. The employees moving through shallow, fast, dangerous waters without any warnings about potential hazards or training on how to operate the boat safely in those conditions. They were maneuvering so they could operate a chainsaw from the boat to remove debris from the fish trap, but they had no protective equipment or training on how to accomplish this task safely. It is only due to chance; these two employees were not killed.

In a briefing on this incident, L&I noted that even after two employee deaths, up until this latest investigation, “safety was [not] a focus of the agency,” and “the agency as a whole appears to be nonchalant to hazards their field staff face on a daily basis.” WDFW’s HR director told L&I investigators: “Staff is passionate about the animals and fish but not the people. Universally, they don’t have these training[s] until someone dies.”

As of February 6, 2025, WDFW is, once again, under another L&I investigation after a week long hospitalization from a workplace exposure. This member was not trained by WDFW, despite WAFWP urging WDFW for this specific training. Furthermore, this is not the first exposure of this nature and will not be the last if things do not change immediately with regards to training, proper PPE, and improvements to buildings/labs where this work takes place.

Even after multiple tragedies, WDFW continues to willfully put its employees in hazardous situations that could lead to serious injury or death. Management has developed an unsatisfactory plan to put employees through necessary training at an extremely slow pace, all while continuing to require them to perform dangerous work before they have completed this training.

Additionally, their safety program continues to take little accountability for many of their inexperienced trainers, trainings that miss the mark for the work our members perform, and several near misses associated with trainings. The above-mentioned incidents do not account for several serious near misses with contractors doing similar work for WDFW.

These four accidents are just the latest in a series of incidents stemming from WDFW’s failure to provide the training guaranteed in its collective bargaining agreement with WAFWP. WAFWP has repeatedly asked WDFW to cease assigning hazardous work to members and employees until they have received adequate training, only to be rebuffed by management’s response that we must continue to be “patient” while the agency creates a training program.

State Audit Reveals Intolerable Working Conditions

One reason these dangerous situations have persisted is that WDFW employees are reluctant to complain about unsafe working conditions, much less refuse to do hazardous work, due to the



agency's record of retaliating against its employees for making complaints. These fears are most acute for probationary and temporary employees, including the two women who were killed, because they can easily be dismissed without scrutiny.

The widespread nature of this retaliatory behavior was noted in a [2021 report from the State Auditor's Office](#), which made a number of shocking findings, including that:

- 11% of WDFW employees reported experiencing retaliatory behavior as a result of reporting misconduct or mismanagement, while 16% witnessed such retaliation, including people being fired or forced out of the agency as a consequence of reporting inappropriate or unethical conduct.
- 10% of WDFW employees has directly witnessed a WDFW employee or supervisor commit a legal or ethical violation in the past year.
- Only 44% of employees believed managers were held accountable when they behave inappropriately.
- 21% of WDFW employees had directly experienced workplace bullying over the prior year, including yelling, demeaning comments and intimidation, while 30% had witnessed it happening to someone else.
- About 25% of the employees the auditors interviewed described instances of gender discrimination at the Department, where only 33% of the workforce are women.

Unfortunately, the Auditor's report was met with silence and inaction. Management made some token adjustments in response, and the Commission was all too willing to call that sufficient, with most Commissioners displaying disinterest and an unwillingness to take any meaningful action to improve working conditions. The continuation of this sort of toxic culture infects everything that WDFW does, limiting its efficiency and effectiveness and perpetuating an environment where employees feel unable to speak up, whether it is on matters that affect state fish and wildlife management or their own safety.

WDFW Employees Need Strong, Independent Commissioners

Until you decided to revoke Governor Inslee's appointments to the Commission, WAFWP was beginning to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Over the past few years, the Commission has gradually improved, with Governor Inslee adding more Commissioners who were willing to put the necessary work into the position, to think and act independently, and to stand up against



powerful political forces. Many of these same Commissioners have also been willing to stick their necks out for agency employees, although they had not yet reached the critical mass necessary to take decisive action. We had hoped progress and change would be made this year.

What we have been hearing has left us gravely concerned that your new appointments could eliminate all this progress and work that has been done with WAFWP. We have been distressed to hear that political considerations are preventing Commissioner Ragen from being seriously considered for reappointment, and the names we have heard circulating as his potential replacement cause us to fear a return to the cronyism and complacency that used to characterize the Commission fully. We also fear that not reappointing Commissioners will serve to silence other independent Commission voices, because it will send a message that your office will not support them if they try to do the right thing, which includes working with WAFWP.

We understand the Commission and process need work; we have heard that clearly from our membership. We hope there will be continued interest by current Commissioners to work with WAFWP, and the other unions represented within WDFW, to address the many upcoming challenges ahead. Currently, however, the Commission is the only entity with the power to change WDFW's dangerous workplace culture and many other shortcomings. For that to happen, we need competent Commissioners who are strong enough to stand up for agency employees and a courageous Governor who is willing to have their backs.

Please feel free to reach out with any questions. I hope to have the opportunity to discuss these issues with you in greater depth sometime soon.

Sincerely,

Candace Hultberg (Bennett), President
Washington Association of Fish and Wildlife Professionals

Cc:
Mike Webb, Chief Strategy Officer
Policy Director Sahar Fathi
Chief Legal Counsel Kristin Beneski
External Affairs Director Jaime Martin
Deputy Policy Director Kenneth Martin
Senior Policy Advisor Owen Rowe