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For Immediate Release: March 17, 2026

Washington Wildlife First sues the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife over the Unlawful Development and Approval of the Game Management Plan

Olympia, WA – Washington Wildlife First and wildlife advocate Martha Hall [filed suit](#) yesterday in Thurston County Superior Court challenging the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) for its failure to uphold its responsibilities as a public trustee in the development and approval of the [2026 Game Management Plan \(Plan\)](#).

The Plan guides how WDFW manages more than 50 species of wildlife classified as “game,” including deer, elk, moose, mountain goats, bears, cougars, waterfowl, and beavers. The complaint alleges that in the development and approval of the plan, WDFW failed in its duty to “preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage” state wildlife on behalf of all current and future Washingtonians. Instead of prioritizing the conservation of species for future generations, the complaint alleges that the Plan allows for continued hunting of vulnerable, declining, and sensitive species without adequate population data or safeguards to prevent species decline.

The complaint also challenges the agency’s issuance of a [Determination of Nonsignificance \(DNS\)](#) under the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA), which summarily concluded—without any support or rationale—that the sweeping Plan would not have significant adverse impacts on wildlife or the environment.

“The people of Washington have placed their trust in WDFW to manage the state’s wildlife on our behalf, and with all the threats to the survival of wildlife, that responsibility has never been more important than it is now,” said Washington Wildlife First’s Science and Advocacy Director Dr. Francisco Santiago-Ávila. “Unfortunately, WDFW has failed in this duty by prioritizing efforts to maximize hunting in the short term over the long-term health of wildlife populations and ecosystems.”

The Fish and Wildlife Commission unanimously [approved the draft GMP](#) at its February 13, 2026, even though multiple commissioners cited serious misgivings during the final discussion about the Plan’s lack of protection for vulnerable species and WDFW’s failure to engage in meaningful review of its potential adverse impacts on wildlife and the environment.

“Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident, but part of the agency’s [clear pattern](#) of evading its legal responsibilities,” Santiago-Ávila said. “Under Director Kelly Susewind, WDFW has consistently refused to explore the potential adverse impacts of its plans and policies, while the commission that is supposed to exercise oversight has allowed this reckless and unlawful behavior to go unchecked.”

Santiago-Ávila noted that one commissioner had suggested that the commission’s role was not to question the agency’s compliance with SEPA, but that this issue would be up to the courts to decide.

“That is an abdication of the commission’s duty to provide oversight of the agency and its director,” he said. “It’s a sure sign of a dysfunctional system when the responsibility to police WDFW’s compliance with fundamental legal obligations is left to small nonprofits and private citizens—litigation should be a last resort, not a first line of defense.”

Washington Wildlife First and its coalition partners submitted [extensive comments](#) on the draft Plan identifying its pervasive flaws, including WDFW’s bias in setting management objectives for each species, its reliance on inadequate data and monitoring, its failure to establish safeguards to guard against species decline, and the fact that it ignores many important measures of species health, including genetics, connectivity, and vulnerability to climate change. These flaws extend to WDFW’s decision to allow continued hunting of species that it has identified as Priority Species, Species of Greatest Conservation Need, and particularly sensitive to climate change and habitat fragmentation, such as bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and Harlequin ducks.

Other commentators also submitted extensive criticisms of the Plan, including for its failure to recognize the importance of keystone species like beavers, which are essential to mitigating climate change by cooling streams, creating natural firebreaks, reducing flooding, and creating habitat for other species. Despite all these benefits beavers bring to the environment, WDFW continues to allow a “recreational” beaver trapping season and does not track the number of beavers whom landowners kill as nuisances.

Washington Wildlife First, other commentators, and some commissioners also raised concerns that WDFW sent a draft of the Plan to organized state and national hunting groups for their revisions roughly a year before the agency circulated it to the full Commission, the state’s Tribes, or the general public for review.

“This shows that WDFW continues to have its priorities backward,” Santiago-Ávila said. “It continues to regard hunters as its only stakeholders in wildlife management, even though hunters now only comprise about 2% of the state’s population, and *all of us* have a vested interest in the future of our wildlife.”

As a public trustee, Santiago-Ávila explained, WDFW has a duty to protect the interests of all Washingtonians without favoritism.

“WDFW can no longer operate as a good ole boys’ club, with an exclusive cabal making crucial decisions about the future of our wildlife behind closed doors,” he said. “The agency needs to treat all Washingtonians evenhandedly, and to step up to fulfill its obligation to protect our wildlife before it is too late.”

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