



Talking Points: Power, Speech, and Who Belongs in Wildlife Policy

Recent events surrounding Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) leadership, including a recently filed [federal civil rights lawsuit](#) alleging retaliation against commissioners and wildlife advocates for protected speech, have raised serious concerns over how agency decisions are being made, whose voices are being heard, and whether public participation is being treated fairly. As the Commission meets in Olympia this April 16-18, many Washingtonians are paying close attention, not because they follow every detail but because they expect honesty, fairness, and accountability from a public agency. What we are seeing right now falls short of that. These talking points highlight those concerns, so people can speak clearly about what matters: protecting wildlife, ensuring fair participation, and restoring trust in the process.

- **Most Washingtonians want wildlife protected, not managed for a narrow set of users:** The vast majority of people in this state do not hunt or fish, but they care deeply about wildlife and expect it to be protected. Yet agency decisions continue to prioritize consumptive use as if it were its primary obligation. It is clearly not. Treating wildlife as if it exists mainly for a small subset of users ignores what most Washingtonians value and expect, and shows up in decisions that fail to reflect the broader public the agency is supposed to serve.
- **Leadership is responding to criticism with retaliation and discouraging public participation:** Recent reports describe leadership directing agency resources to go after commissioners and members of the public who criticized their decisions. That is not oversight; it is retaliation. When criticism triggers targeting instead of accountability, it sends a clear message: speaking up comes with grave consequences. That is precisely how participation gets suppressed, and it has no place in a public agency.
- **Wildlife advocates are being singled out and leadership is deciding who “belongs”:** Communicating, organizing, and advocating are normal parts of the democratic process. Yet when wildlife advocates do it, it is treated as suspicious or improper, while the same behavior by hunting, fishing, and industry groups is treated as routine, and even encouraged (like the department's program to retain, reactivate, and recruit hunters, without any similar program for, for example, wildlife watchers). That is not neutrality. It is clearly discriminatory. Public officials do not get to decide which members of the public are legitimate participants in decisions that affect everyone. They are expected to serve everyone.

- **Wildlife is a public trust and current practices ignore that obligation:** State law is clear: wildlife belongs to all Washingtonians. It does not belong to those who exploit it, profit from it, or live near it. Any system that centers decision-making around a narrow set of interests is not just unbalanced, it fails the basic obligation to manage wildlife for the full public.
- **This reflects a broader failure of leadership:** Fairness, transparency, and equal treatment are not optional—they are the expectation. When leadership applies rules selectively, treats viewpoints differently, and responds to criticism with pressure instead of accountability, that is not a gray area. It is a failure to meet basic responsibilities.
- **The Commission must act to restore accountability and trust:** The Commission's role is oversight. That means stepping in when leadership crosses lines, not deferring to it. A full, independent, and transparent review is necessary, and it must lead to real accountability. Without that, trust will continue to erode—and rightly so.