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Priority Habitats

The statewide Growth Management Act guides planning and development in the state of Washington. This act requires local jurisdictions to adopt regulations that preserve critical areas of ecological importance such as wetlands, areas that affect aquifer recharge and wildlife habitat conservation areas. A set of these regulations is usually called a Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO). CAOs must also identify and protect priority habitats and species identified by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). Jurisdictions must make an effort to coordinate CAOs with other governing organizations in their area. CAOs and the associated regulations must be formulated using the “best available science”, including current scientific research, expert opinions by specialists and reports compiled by public agencies, including WDFW and Washington Department of Ecology.

Eighteen priority habitats have been identified by the WDFW, so far. Criteria for inclusion include unique ecological functioning and/or presence of rare or keystone species groups or structural elements. Prairies, Oregon white oak (*Quercus garryana*) woodlands, aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) stands, caves, snags and old growth forests are some examples. CAOs may also include habitats of local importance. Thurston County protects balds (grassland communities that are similar to prairies but occur on bedrock protrusions with shallower, drier soils). Whatcom County has special regulations to conserve kelp and eelgrass beds. Some jurisdictions may determine what constitutes a habitat of local importance on a case-by-case basis.

Jurisdictions determine buffer requirements or setbacks for priority habitats to minimize impacts by development. Jurisdictions also decide on allowable actions and actions that require permits within the habitat areas and buffers. Examples of allowed actions include existing and on-going agriculture, drainage ditch maintenance and removal of invasive weeds. New bridges, culverts, roads or trails usually require permits and are subject to review by the local jurisdiction. Actions that are prohibited outright may include construction of piers, docks, and stormwater facilities as well as mineral extraction and new agricultural activities. A Critical Areas Report must be completed for any action requiring permits within a priority habitat or its associated buffer. The Critical Areas Report, prepared by a reputable and qualified biologist or ecologist, will include a discussion of the impacts of the proposed action on associated soils, hydrology and vegetation. The report will recommend a plan for mitigation of the impacts and set performance standards to assess the success of the mitigation. The report will define a monitoring and maintenance schedule for the project and follow-up actions to address performance standards not met. A map of the various resources present and a vegetation survey may be required. In part based upon this report, jurisdictions allow or prohibit the proposed action and determine buffer widths and mitigation requirements.

Priority habitats are the special places that help make western Washington a unique and rewarding place to live. CAOs protect these places for the sake of the environment and generations to come. Work to enhance priority habitats through responsible land management and volunteering with land management agencies and non-profit land stewardship groups.

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