

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5846

As of January 15, 2024

Title: An act relating to beaver ecosystem management.

Brief Description: Concerning beaver ecosystem management.

Sponsors: Senators Salomon, Liias, Lovelett, Saldaña and Van De Wege.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks: 1/15/24.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Directs the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to create and implement a beaver ecosystem management plan including managing beaver conflicts and identifying locations where beaver provides benefit to salmon habitats.
- Establishes a grant program to provide beaver education and outreach, technical assistance, and resources to assist landowners in living with beavers on their property.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, WATER, NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Staff: Jeff Olsen (786-7428)

Background: The Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) operates under a statutory mandate to preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage Washington's wildlife, food fish, game fish, and shellfish. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has been delegated the responsibility to carry out this mandate at the direction of the Commission, which includes establishing basic rules and regulations governing the time, place, manner, and methods used to harvest or enjoy fish and wildlife. WDFW must

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conserve the wildlife and food fish, game fish, and shellfish resources in a manner that does not impair the resource.

WDFW may permit the relocation of wild beavers on public or private land with the permission of the landowner. Private individuals may trap beavers if they hold a state trapping license. All trapping must be conducted in accordance with the trapping seasons established by the Commission.

WDFW may condition beaver relocations to maximize the success and minimize the risk of the relocation. Release site conditions WDFW may consider include the gradient of the stream, the adequacy of food sources, the elevation, and the stream geomorphology. WDFW may condition how the capture and release occurs and require specific training for capturing, handling, and transporting wild beavers. WDFW may require anyone releasing wild beavers under the beaver relocation program to notify landowners adjacent to the site where the beavers will be relocated.

Summary of Bill: WDFW must create and implement a statewide beaver ecosystem management plan. The plan must define the role beavers play in maintaining the health of ecosystems and biodiversity in Washington including, but not limited to, providing benefits in watersheds including natural ground and surface water storage, stream temperature moderation, improved water quality, and the improvement or creation of habitat for other species.

The plan must define beavers as a keystone species and prioritize the provision of resources and services to resolve human conflict with beaver activity including education, coexistence, relocation, and as a last resort, lethal removal services. The plan must include recommendations and guidance for:

- protecting beavers and reducing beaver mortality in priority habitats;
- managing beaver conflicts and mitigating property damage caused by beavers;
- providing education and outreach regarding the benefits of beaver habitat;
- providing technical and financial assistance for protecting beaver habitat or participating in a beaver relocation project;
- identifying locations where the reintroduction or protection of beaver provides benefits to salmon habitats;
- restricting recreational harvest at release sites and monitoring beaver survival;
- monitoring beaver populations and take; and
- involving volunteer and nonprofit organizations in beaver education and outreach programs.

WDFW must establish a grant program to provide beaver education and outreach, technical assistance and resources to assist landowners in living with beavers on their property, and support for beaver relocation programs. WDFW shall establish grant criteria, including eligibility and cost-share requirements, for participating in the program.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 12, 2024.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Beaver create habitat that benefits other species, including salmon. Beaver should be managed as a keystone species for ecological benefits, and not managed as pests. There are co-existence services that can be used to assist landowners with living with beavers. There are certain areas in the built environment that are incompatible with beavers, which makes beaver relocation an option. Beavers create water retention, which helps address climate resiliency, flood control, water quality, instream flow and wildfire. While there are costs to implement the bill, it is much less than the costs of salmon recovery projects. Adding grant resources and support for outreach and education is helpful in implementing a statewide strategy. Temperatures in some streams are too high, and more needs to be done to protect water quality.

CON: There can be negative impacts from beaver and relocating beaver is not always an option. Beaver are not a good fit in every watershed. Not being able to trap as many beavers is a concern. The bill contains broad language, and it is not clear property owners are able to mitigate against damage caused by beaver. Beaver need to be properly managed.

OTHER: The prohibition of trapping at relocation sites has no time limit or defined area and becomes a ban on trapping. Control of beavers is necessary and relocation does not always work.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Jesse Salomon, Prime Sponsor; Mark Heckert, South Sound Beaver Recovery; Alexa Whipple, Methow Beaver Project, a program of Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation; Margen Carlson, WDFW; Lloyd Lytle; Lorna Smith; Nadine Nadow, Conservation Northwest; Susan D Kane-Ronning, PHD, Washington Sierra Club Wildlife Committee; Daryl Williams, Tulalip Tribes; Jacob Heckert.

CON: Kelsey Ross; Caleb Gwerder, Washington Farm Bureau.

OTHER: Ryan Garrett.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.