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**SUBSTITUTE SENATE BILL 5846**

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**State of Washington 68th Legislature 2024 Regular Session**

**By** Senate Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks (originally sponsored by Senators Salomon, Liias, Lovelett, Saldaña, and Van De Wege)

AN ACT Relating to beaver ecosystem management; adding new sections to chapter 77.12 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  The legislature finds that beavers play a significant role in maintaining the health of ecosystems in Washington. The legislature recognizes that beavers are a keystone species that provide habitats and resources that other species, including salmon, steelhead, trout, waterfowl, shorebirds, deer, elk, songbirds, bats, cougars, bears, and amphibians need to survive. Beavers provide benefits to watersheds including expanding habitat diversity, buffering flood and drought conditions, increasing surface water and groundwater recharge, moderating in-stream water temperatures, increasing diversity of riparian vegetation, and providing refugia during and after wildfires. Widely hailed as ecosystem engineers, beavers provide similar benefits to salmon recovery projects, such as improving water quality, reducing stream gradients, and restoring degraded riparian area, without costly capital investments and technical engineering. Protecting beavers and beaver habitat provides significant ecosystem benefits, improves the natural ecological functions of Washington's watersheds, and builds climate resilience.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 77.12 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The department must create and implement a statewide beaver ecosystem management plan. The plan must define the role that 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, reduced stream velocities, reduced stream sediment transport, moderation of extreme flood events, habitat and biodiversity provision, reduced nutrient transport, increased pollutant and greenhouse gas sequestration, 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 recognize that people are part of ecosystems and that ecosystems cross jurisdictional lines. The plan must fulfill the mandate identified in RCW 77.04.012 by including recommendations and guidance for:

(a) Protecting beavers and reducing beaver mortality in priority habitat, freshwater habitats of special concern identified in WAC 220-660-100, as that section existed on January 1, 2024, and fish and wildlife conservation areas as defined in WAC 365-190-130, as that section existed on January 1, 2024;

(b) Managing beaver conflicts and mitigating property damage caused by beavers, provided that conflict management at compensatory mitigation sites as defined by WAC 220-660-030, as that section existed on January 1, 2024, must consider the goals and objectives of the site;

(c) Providing education and outreach to landowners and community members regarding the benefits of beaver habitat and available tools and options to mitigate or reduce conflict;

(d) Providing technical and financial assistance for protecting beaver habitat in situ or participating in a beaver relocation project;

(e) Identifying locations where the reintroduction or protection of beaver provides benefits to salmon habitats;

(f) Restricting recreational harvest at release sites and monitoring beaver survival and establishment at release sites;

(g) Building partnerships with land managers, local governments, tribes, the scientific community, recreational beaver trappers, riverscape restoration practitioners, and other stakeholders; and

(h) Involving volunteer and nonprofit organizations in beaver education and outreach programs.

(2) Nothing in this section prevents any landowner from taking immediate action within the scope of existing law necessary to protect life, property, and built infrastructure including, but not limited to, homes, structures, roads, culverts, and bridges.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 77.12 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The department shall establish a grant program to provide:

(a) Beaver education and outreach;

(b) Technical assistance and resources to assist landowners in living with beavers on their property; and

(c) Support for beaver relocation programs consistent with the beaver ecosystem management plan adopted under section 2 of this act and the relocation requirements as specified in RCW 77.32.585.

(2) The department shall establish grant criteria, including eligibility and cost-share requirements, for participating in the program.

**--- END ---**