



PRAIRIE-OAK HABITAT

(Updated 2-9-2011)

A 2010 Critical Areas Update Fact Sheet

PUGET SOUND PRAIRIES

Puget Sound prairies and oak woodlands are vanishing rapidly due to development pressures. According to The Nature Conservancy, only about three percent of native Puget Sound prairies remain in existence today, and some of the most valuable areas are located here in Thurston County. Good examples of prairies in Thurston County include Glacial Heritage, Mima Mounds, and Scatter Creek Preserves.

A few of the larger prairies can be seen easily, while others are scattered among forests, farms and houses. These lands are home to several rare and endangered species and help define the landscape of Thurston County.

As prairies disappear, the native plants and wildlife they support also disappear and are replaced by invasive, non-native plants and wildlife, and human development.

If Thurston County fails to protect rare and endangered species, the state and federal governments may step in and enact stricter requirements.



Image courtesy ShannonParish.com

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE PRAIRIES ON MY PROPERTY?

Approximate locations of some critical areas in Thurston County are available in the Resource Stewardship Permit Assistance Center and may also be shown on Thurston County's GeoData website: www.geodata.org. It is important to note that maps are intended to be used as a guide and do not provide a definitive designation. You may call the Thurston County Permit Assistance Center at (360) 786-5490 or visit the Permit Assistance Center in Building 1 of the Thurston County courthouse complex, 2000 Lakeridge Drive S.W. in Olympia. The Permit Assistance Center is open from 8 a.m. to noon, Monday through Friday.

Thurston County also offers a critical area review service whereby a staff member will visit a property to help identify critical areas and the possible buildable area before a property owner submits a permit application. This service, subject to fees, helps property owners develop better site plans. A more rigorous environmental review of the site plan itself is conducted during the permit-review process.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

The potential amendments include the following provisions to protect prairies and oak habitat and the important habitat they provide for wildlife, including rare and endangered species. These provisions are consistent with interim regulations that have already been approved by Thurston County commissioners.

- A prairie or Oregon white oak habitat area could be as small as one acre and still be classified as “important habitat.” Areas less than one acre in size could also be included if they are functionally related to nearby prairie and/or oak habitat and have similar characteristics. Small lots that contain prairie soil but that are unlikely to contain prairie habitat due to their size and the nature of surrounding development would be exempt from this classification.
- Individual Oregon white oak trees would also be considered important habitat if they are of value to fish and wildlife. This is consistent with existing policy regarding Oregon white oaks.
- It would no longer be necessary for an area to be dominated by prairie vegetation in order to be considered a prairie. Invasive species have overrun many prairie areas. For instance, some areas dominated by Scot’s (Scotch) Broom (non-native shrub) or other invasive species to prairies would be considered prairie if the area is restorable and there are native prairie species in the understory below the shrubs.

- Under the existing Critical Areas Ordinance, a property owner who wishes to develop land that contains an important habitat must provide a habitat management plan during the land-use review/permitting process.* The same requirement is made for those who wish to develop land within 600 feet from the point location of an important species, even if that location is on another property.

Under the potential amendments, a habitat management plan or a critical area report would be required if the property contained important habitat or an important species, or if the proposed development would occur within 600 feet of the point location of an important species. Buffers would then be established on a case-by-case basis according to the habitat management plan or critical area report, the Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) management recommendations for Washington’s priority habitats and species, and consultation with WDFW or others with expertise.

*Note: A habitat management plan is a plan that identifies the location of the important habitat area, any incursions or impacts into the habitat by the development, and ways to mitigate any impacts to the habitat. The primary goal of any plan is to avoid impacts or alterations to important habitat.

BEST AVAILABLE SCIENCE

- The potential amendments are based on scientific information that is already deemed Best Available Science by the state and federal governments, Growth Management Hearings boards, courts, and other western Washington counties. A list of sources is posted on the “Critical Areas Update” link of www.thurstonplanning.org.

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