



STATE OF WASHINGTON

September 9, 2021

Honorable Pat McCarthy
Washington State Auditor
P.O. Box 40021
Olympia, WA 98504-0021

Dear Auditor McCarthy:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and respond to the State Auditor's Office performance audit on workplace culture at the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). WDFW and the Office of Financial Management (OFM) jointly prepared this response.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife recognizes that past instances of sexual harassment have significantly harmed those staff who were victims as well as witnesses of harassment. We also know that these events decreased morale, reduced trust in leadership, and hindered our ability to meet our collective mission. WDFW's history is important because when it comes to our culture, past actions echo into the future, with lasting consequences. The work done by the State Auditor's Office in describing WDFW's culture and identifying recommendations is important and appreciated as we continue to heal, learn and grow in our shared commitment to a respectful workplace.

We are heartened by the finding that sexual harassment is not a pervasive issue within the department. WDFW has been focused on this issue for several years, and the evidence suggests the improvements are starting to shift the culture. The timeline (pg. 10 of the audit report) illustrates the number and breadth of changes WDFW has undertaken in the last two years that have increased accountability and strengthened our ability to ensure a respectful workplace. For example, WDFW established and deployed a set of core values that we can all abide by and stand up for; invested in a third-party reporting tool; hired a diversity, equity, and inclusion manager; increased training; and improved communication throughout the agency. In fact, the majority of the director's tenure overlaps with the audit time period, creating an opportunity to use the auditor's data as a baseline from which we can measure progress.

The WDFW Executive Management Team is committed and focused on improving the department's culture. To that end, leadership has articulated a vision for a respectful and inclusive workplace and is focused on improving accountability to WDFW values and increasing investments in training and staff to support these efforts. Changes at the executive level have a cascading effect throughout the agency and are directly implemented by supervisors and the 1,900 staff at WDFW. We appreciate all the efforts by our staff and their commitment to building strong, inclusive teams. We see the results of their work in the SAO's findings that show the majority of WDFW staff have a positive view of their team's workplace culture and feel that their team's culture has further improved in the last year. Importantly, most supervisors are reported by their staff as modeling WDFW's values of accountability, service, professionalism, integrity, respect and empathy.

We understand how critical it is to have robust reporting and the expectation that when people see something, they say something. The results of the audit further show that staff feel comfortable reporting improper behavior to their supervisor (80%). The Executive Management Team and senior leaders have been focused on creating conditions that encourage reporting – through bystander training,

frequent leadership conversations, and the purchase of Red Flag Reporting. But it is individual line staff and supervisors who have stepped up to the daily commitment of inclusivity and respect. We cannot overstate the importance of their leadership throughout WDFW.

The audit also revealed that 21% of employees are exposed to yelling, demeaning comments or intimidation. This is an area for improvement within WDFW. Upon review of the SAO data, the frequency of this behavior at WDFW is similar to what is experienced by the overall employed population in the United States (20%). Our goal is to significantly reduce the occurrence of these events at WDFW and ensure that every employee experiences a safe workplace free from demeaning behavior.

Like other natural resource agencies, WDFW continues to have some of the lowest diversity in state government. WDFW also continues to struggle to achieve gender parity — nearly 35% of our workforce identifies as female or non-binary. To address this, WDFW must create a respectful workplace where inclusivity is broadly demonstrated so we can successfully recruit and retain a diverse workforce. Therefore, issues of gender, racial discrimination, or other forms of discrimination are of particular concern. The finding that management is not perceived as consistently addressing concerns necessitates action in order to become an employer of choice and to ensure that every employee is respected.

In the past year, after the conclusion of SAO's work, WDFW finalized three new policies to increase respect in the workplace: a DEI policy requiring all employees to promote and practice inclusion and respect for diversity, a policy on providing a respectful work environment, and an anti-discrimination and harassment policy. Additionally, WDFW has focused on including our values in staff expectations and completing annual evaluation processes, with 92% completed in 2020 and in 2021. WDFW can build on this work while acknowledging how much the department must do to fully realize a respectful workplace for every single employee.

As a large, multi-disciplinary organization with staff in every corner of the state, WDFW struggles to effectively communicate from the top down, from the bottom up, and across region and program areas. The audit highlighted the need to strengthen internal communication: two-way communication, one-way communication from leadership, and cross-program communication to reduce silos. Although WDFW has made improvements throughout the pandemic, the department looks forward to continuing efforts to further engage employees both remotely and in-person. In June 2021, we completed our first internal communication plan, which outlines strategies and measures to evaluate success.

We appreciate the iterative approach that led to this final product. We thank the State Auditor's Office for its time, commitment, and willingness to assist us on our journey. Your findings confirm that while the department still has work to do, we are headed in the right direction.

Sincerely,



Kelly Susewind
Director
Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife



David Schumacher
Director
Office of Financial Management

cc: Jamila Thomas, Chief of Staff, Office of the Governor
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OFFICIAL STATE CABINET AGENCY RESPONSE TO PERFORMANCE AUDIT ON ASSESSING THE WORKPLACE CULTURE AT THE DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE – SEPTEMBER 9, 2021

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Office of Financial Management provide this management response to the State Auditor's Office performance audit report received on August 18, 2021.

SAO PERFORMANCE AUDIT OBJECTIVES:

This performance audit was a broadly scoped assessment of workplace culture designed to address these questions:

- What factors at the Department of Fish and Wildlife shape its workplace culture?
 - How does the agency's culture affect its performance and ability to achieve its mission?
 - What steps could leadership take to improve the agency's workplace culture?
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Recommendations to the WDFW:

SAO Recommendations 1-3: To ensure managers and staff consistently address unprofessional behavior in the workplace, as described on pages 21-37, we recommend the agency:

1. Develop a professional conduct policy, which clearly identifies the consequences for all types of unprofessional behavior. Establish controls to ensure all employees are aware of and understand the policy. For example, have all employees sign to acknowledge they have read and understand the policy or develop training to educate employees on the policy.
2. Ensure all supervisors receive required training on how to effectively manage personnel, including how to respond to observed or reported incidents of unprofessional behavior. Review training content to ensure it emphasizes the necessary soft skills required to manage personnel.
3. Implement a process, such as 360 evaluations, for employees to provide feedback on their supervisors' behavior and effectiveness.

STATE RESPONSE: WDFW recently completed three new policies directed at creating a respectful workplace. The policies outline specific responsibilities of employees, supervisors and leadership. They also describe specific behaviors that are unacceptable. All staff currently sign the policy acknowledgement each year.

Over the course of the pandemic, virtually all non-COVID safety training was halted to redirect resources to COVID and safety-related training. Efforts include:

- Developed agency values in 2019: accountability, service, professionalism, integrity, respect, and empathy.
 - Developed educational and training materials. Almost all internal messages reference agency values and we have included them in performance expectations.
- Contributing to the statewide DEI training development team by working with OFM to implement enterprise-wide training around DEI.
- Exploring online bystander training.

- Promoted “Picture a Scientist,” a movie in August 2021 that illustrates the toll of gender discrimination and sexual harassment within STEM fields. WDFW also made this film available to all natural resources agencies. A series of reflection sessions is planned for September 2021.
- Review of the mandatory supervisory training that began in August 2021. We plan to restart this training, which includes soft skills and responding to unprofessional behavior, at the beginning of next year (COVID dependent).
- During the 2020-21 evaluation season, the Director’s Office piloted a 360-evaluation process which allowed colleagues and direct reports to provide feedback to executives. We will use the lessons we learned to develop a 360-approach agency-wide.

Action Steps and Time Frame:

- Launch an agency-wide 360 evaluation approach. *By June 31, 2022.*
- Assist with implementing enterprise-wide DEI training. *By December 31, 2022.*
- Review the online bystander training options. *By January 31, 2022.*
- Promoted a movie that illustrates the toll of gender discrimination and sexual harassment within STEM fields. *Completed August 2021.*
- Offer a series of reflection sessions on “Picture a Scientist.” *By September 30, 2021.*
- Review of the Mandatory Supervisory Training. *By December 31, 2021.*
- Restart mandatory supervisory training. *By January 31, 2022 (COVID dependent).*

SAO Recommendation 4: To ensure employees report incidents of unprofessional behavior, as described on page 36, we recommend the agency:

4. Establish clear policies and procedures that outline the investigation process of reports so investigations are handled in a consistent manner and employees know what to expect.

STATE RESPONSE: WDFW updated the Red Flag Reporting page on the agency intranet site in August 2021. The updated page lays out training on how to make a complaint, provides additional resources for making a formal complaint, and provides links to the Employee Assistance Program.

Action Steps and Time Frame:

- Add a summary of the investigative process to the internal Red Flag Reporting webpage. *By January 31, 2022.*

SAO Recommendations 5-7: To help the agency overcome silos and improve communication, as described on pages 38-49, we recommend the agency:

5. Expand opportunities for employees to interact with employees from other programs/regions and different levels of management.
6. Create controls to ensure employees receive and know how to access important information.
7. Establish mechanisms to facilitate regular communication up the chain of command to understand and address the needs and concerns of all employees.

STATE RESPONSE: Since the beginning of the SAO audit, WDFW has undertaken multiple efforts to help break down silos and improve communication.

- The agency continues to grow the use of district teams, which allows cross-program coordination and interaction within regions. District teams are described in the Conservation Policy, which was signed in 2019.
- Regional directors and program directors hold monthly all-staff meetings to share information and hear concerns. Program all-staff meetings began in April 2020. Regional meetings began in most regions in September 2020.
- The agency recently developed an internal communication plan with specific metrics.
- The agency developed an employee engagement action plan to address priority areas tied to specific OFM employee engagement survey questions.
- The deputy director has held an all-staff online “coffee chat” every other Tuesday morning since April 2021. The coffee chats are designed to provide time for staff to communicate directly with the deputy director around topics of broad interest.
- The diversity, equity, and inclusion manager holds an online “Minute with Marvin” every other Tuesday (on the Tuesdays between the coffee chats), where staff explore issues around inclusivity.
- The DEI manager holds listening sessions throughout the state with regional staff to gather input on how WDFW can be an inclusive workplace. This started in March 2021 and will continue for the next several years. The DEI manager briefs the deputy director on outcomes and recommends next steps which then become part of the employee engagement action plan and/or internal communication plan.
- Additionally, the Diversity Advisory Committee plans on creating employee affinity groups to create internal support structures that would be cross-program/cross-region.

Action Steps and Time Frame:

- Launch the first Employee Affinity Group. *By June 30, 2022.*
- Implement internal communication plan and track metrics. *By December 31, 2022.*

SAO Recommendations 8-9: To ensure current and future workplace culture improvement initiatives succeed, as described starting on pages 50-54, we recommend the agency:

8. Review and update the current initiatives to incorporate the following leading practices:
 - a. Use a combination of data sources, including performance metrics and feedback from staff, to regularly assess areas for improvement
 - b. Update existing initiatives or develop new efforts to address the areas for improvement identified in the monitoring assessment from 8a
 - c. Establish performance metrics to evaluate whether the initiatives are successful
 - d. Clearly and consistently communicate the purpose of the initiatives and how they relate to the core values of the agency to employees and other stakeholders
9. Incorporate these leading practices in all future improvement initiatives.

STATE RESPONSE: WDFW’s 25-year Strategic Plan describes specific initiatives that WDFW will undertake over the coming 25 years. WDFW encouraged every supervisor to connect staff work to activities in the strategic plan during the 2020-21 evaluation cycle. As the strategic plan matures, WDFW will review and revise to maintain up-to-date metrics and ensure initiatives are well communicated.

Additionally, WDFW recently published Red Flag Reporting dashboards on its intranet. The agency also plans to add its communication metrics on the intranet later this year.

Metrics have also been developed for the priority questions that WDFW is focusing on for improvement in the OFM employee engagement survey. A dashboard to measure progress will be developed by spring of next year.

Action Steps and Time Frame:

- Launch strategic plan tracker to track metrics and implementation. *Completed August 2021.*
 - Encourage all supervisors to connect staff work to activities in the strategic plan during 2020-21 evaluations. *Completed August 2021.*
 - Publish Red Flag Reporting dashboards on the WDFW intranet. *Completed August 2021.*
 - Publish internal communication plan metrics on the WDFW intranet. *By January 31, 2022.*
 - Develop a dashboard for priority questions that WDFW is focusing on for improvement in the state employee engagement survey. *By April 30, 2022.*
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