

Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit
Policy Overview and Recommendations for Project Fit with Unit mission
February 24, 2021 (revised)

Background

On October 21, 2020, the coordinating committee of the Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit (hereafter, Unit) recommended the development of a policy statement addressing the fit of cooperator-funded projects brought into University of Washington and Washington State University through the Unit. The cooperative arrangement underpinning the establishment and functioning of the Unit is unique. This arrangement sees multiple cooperating entities collectively committing substantial resources to the Unit to meet the research, technical assistance, and graduate education mission that benefits all Unit cooperators. The spirit of the cooperative agreement then, as realized through these significant cooperative investments, is to ensure that projects benefitting from the administrative contributions truly meet the mission of the Unit as established.

Need

This policy overview is necessitated by the fact that a retrospective review of some funded projects realizing significant administrative benefits, in this case reduced overhead charges provided by the host university and administrative support provided by Unit staff, may have incomplete linkages to the mission of the Unit. This statement seeks to chart a path to improve these linkages with the goal of further enhancing the true and full benefits of the Unit to all cooperators.

Mission Statement

The Washington Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit works to support conservation of fish, wildlife, and their habitats in Washington, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. We undertake management-relevant research, support decision makers through technical assistance, and train the next generation of conservation leaders. Our vision is excellence in applied fish and wildlife science, with research that is responsive to management agency needs while continuing to push the boundaries of our knowledge.

Unit scientists are experts in quantitative methods, population ecology, conservation biology, and decision analysis. We study a broad array of taxa, including marine and terrestrial mammals, marine and terrestrial birds, amphibians and reptiles, anadromous fishes, and the habitats that support them. We also facilitate research collaborations between agencies and scientists at the University of Washington and Washington State University, providing our agency cooperators with access to expertise in many research areas. We work closely with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Washington Department of Ecology, the Washington Department of Natural Resources, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and many other federal agencies.

We are committed to providing a world-class training environment for graduate students and post-doctoral scientists in applied fish and wildlife science. By training students in an environment that allows direct collaboration with agency scientists, managers, and university scientists, we strive to produce students who embody our vision of excellence in applied science.

Critical Elements

The mission statement of the Unit is reviewed periodically, but the major emphasis of the mission is unlikely to veer significantly from what is established. The inherent critical elements of the Unit's mission statement as they relate to the present question are twofold: 1) an emphasis on taxa, i.e., a clear focus on biological elements of resources; and 2) expertise of Unit scientists in areas focused on the conservation of fish and

wildlife populations. The role of the physical environment in framing habitats for fish and wildlife populations is clearly acknowledged. However, research on questions focused purely on the physical environment, unless directly connected to the core fish and wildlife element, are not consistent with the inherently biologically oriented mission of the Unit. In this context, the connections between physical and biological elements must be direct, not nebulous (e.g., the study of air, water, and land in-and-of themselves are not adequately connected to the Unit mission).

Process

The specific process on how to achieve the goal of ensuring the close connection of funded projects with the Unit's fish and wildlife conservation mission will be evolving, and likely adaptive as the cooperative moves forward. Presently, the coordinating committee adopts the following as recommended best practices to ensure this fit as best as practicable:

- 1) Projects will first be reviewed by the relevant agency representative to the Unit's coordinating committee.
- 2) The agency representative will present all projects being considered for administration through the Unit to the Unit Leader ahead of their anticipated start date. The best business practice moving forward is that as soon as a project is conceived of for funding, this connection should be made. In spite of documented existing business practices for some funded work, there will be no exception to this rule. It is extremely important that projects for approval do not arrive at the university without first connecting, and communicating, with the Unit Leader.
- 3) Any project approved for funding through the Unit carries a responsibility of expected communication with the Unit Leader for reporting purposes. A failure to communicate on needed information in a timely fashion on funded projects will jeopardize future Unit support irrespective of how closely matched a project may be to the mission. The Unit Leader will bring such projects to the attention of the executive committee as necessary.
- 4) Projects up for consideration to be administered through the Unit should comport with the mission of the Unit as identified above – projects should directly relate to fish and wildlife management and/or conservation. It is important to note that research projects may be broad and interdisciplinary. For interdisciplinary projects, a substantial, rather than minor, component of the project should be focused on the Unit mission.
- 5) Linkages with the Unit mission must be made clear in statements of work or study objectives.
- 6) The Unit Leader, under consultation with the appropriate agency representative, reserves the right to decline projects based on any disconnects identified between the proposed study and the mission of the Unit. Should significant disagreements arise, in these cases the Unit Leader will share such projects with the executive committee who will vote to approve/dis-approve the project.

Goal

The Washington Unit is the most complex entity in the USGS Cooperative Research Units program, and constructively pushes the boundaries of the conception of a Cooperative Research Unit as compared to others across the country. As of this date, significant contributions and conciliations have been made by cooperators to remain engaged and realize the benefits of this united engagement, which are significant. The coordinating committee's hope here is to simply document the present intent, and the importance to all to ensure the match between benefit and outcome. The collaborations between agencies and scientists at University of Washington and Washington State University have the potential to be immense, and the Unit is designed to provide agency cooperators with access to expertise in many research areas. The Unit is committed to providing a world-class training environment for graduate students and post-doctoral scientists in applied fish and wildlife science. By training students in an environment that allows direct collaboration with agency scientists, managers, and university scientists, the Unit strives to produce students who embody a vision of excellence in applied science. The goal of this policy overview and recommended procedures moving forward is to ensure that this overall connection remains strong.