

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 14, 2010

Commissioner Goldmark designates first Aquatic Reserve in Puget Sound since taking office

Commissioner adopts protection plan of Smith & Minor Islands off Whidbey

OLYMPIA – Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark today announced the management plan for the Smith and Minor Islands Aquatic Reserve, marking the first aquatic reserve he has designated since taking office in January 2009.

Goldmark leads the Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which will manage this new reserve and its resources. DNR is considering several additional proposed reserves elsewhere in Puget Sound.

“All of Puget Sound is a special place, but the network of aquatic reserves give us a unique opportunity to conduct research and monitoring while allowing current uses by the public,” said Commissioner Goldmark. “As with all of our aquatic reserves, the Smith & Minor Islands site was proposed by the public, and in this case I would like to give special thanks to the work of People for Puget Sound for their assistance in the designation process.”

Located off Whidbey Island, the Smith and Minor Islands Aquatic Reserve is recognized for its unique and diverse plants, animals and habitat. DNR worked with citizens, local governments and industry to create the management plan. The plan identifies the reserve’s natural resources, habitats, and species; what threats they face; and how DNR will select and manage proposed uses of the reserve and its resources.

DNR is committed to the clean-up and restoration of Puget Sound as described in Commissioner Goldmarks’ Strategic Plan. Once an aquatic reserve is designated, future DNR authorized uses at the site must be consistent with the goals and objectives for resource protection identified in the management plan. The reserve area applies to only state-owned aquatic lands and not private holdings.

Link to a map of Smith & Minor Islands Aquatic Reserve:

http://www.dnr.wa.gov/ResearchScience/Topics/AquaticHabitats/Pages/aqr_ac_smith_minor_island_rsrve_proposal.aspx - map

Link to a management plan for Smith & Minor Islands Aquatic Reserve:

http://www.dnr.wa.gov/ResearchScience/Topics/AquaticHabitats/Pages/aqr_ac_smith_minor_island_rsrve_proposal.aspx

DNR Aquatic Reserves Program

The DNR Aquatic Reserves Program was established to promote the preservation, restoration, and enhancement of state-owned aquatic lands. Involvement of the broader scientific, business, and local communities in locating potential reserve sites helps DNR focus on long-term management options for a specific area. By encompassing a network of aquatic reserves, DNR can better research and monitor potential stressors in our aquatic environments, and contribute to the protection and restoration of Puget Sound.

DNR—Steward of state aquatic lands

As steward of more than 2.6 million acres of state-owned aquatic lands, DNR manages the bedlands under Puget Sound, the coast, many of Washington's beaches, and natural lakes and navigable rivers. DNR manages these lands not only to facilitate navigation, commerce, and public access, but also to ensure protection of aquatic habitats. State-owned aquatic lands include:

- * About 68,100 acres of state-owned tidelands, or 106 square miles
- * 90,000 acres of harbor areas
- * All submerged marine lands below extreme low tide—that's 3,430 square miles of bedlands under navigable waters, as well as freshwater shorelands and bedlands

Peter Goldmark, who administers the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, is Washington's 13th Commissioner of Public Lands since statehood in 1889.

Media Contact: Abbey Corzine, Communications Specialist, 360-902-1401, abbey.corzine@dnr.wa.gov

#

Video of the site:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/WAstateDNR#p/u/5/qYxm3joz1GE>

Reserve to provide habitat

By Toni Grove
Examiner Staff Writer

An important step was taken last week to protect the biodiversity of Puget Sound when Washington Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark signed into effect the official designation of Smith and Minor Islands Aquatic Reserve at a ceremony at Fort Ebey State Park.

Located off of the western shore of Whidbey Island, the reserve covers over 36,300 acres of tidelands and seafloor habitat surrounding Smith and Minor islands, already part of the San Juan Islands National Wildlife Reserve.

First proposed for designation in 2008 by People for Puget Sound, Smith and Minor Islands is the first new aquatic reserve in a decade and joins four others throughout the Sound and Strait of Juan de Fuca: Cypress Island, Fidalgo Bay, Maury Island and Cherry Point.

On hand to celebrate the new reserve were representatives from People for Puget Sound, the state Department of Natural Resources and Island County. Commissioners Helen Price Johnson and Angie Homola congratulated the team that has worked for the past two years to make the reserve a reality.

Dave Peeler, director of programs for People for Puget Sound, said Smith and Minor Islands is one of the largest aquatic reserves.

“The nice thing about this kind of reserve is that it’s thinking about the future,” he said, referring to the reserve’s role in protecting important wildlife habitat.

Goldmark said the reserve is a step in the right direction for the marine environment. “We’re committed to the cleanup and the recovery of a state treasure, a national treasure, the Puget Sound,” he said.

Connected to neighboring Minor Island by a spit of land visible only during low tide, Smith Island was once home to a lighthouse that endured for 100 years before massive erosion of the island’s bluff forced its abandonment in the mid-20th century. Little evidence of human habitation remains, and the local wildlife has taken back the island.

The islands are used year ’round by harbor and elephant seals as a resting and nursery site, and Steller and California sea lions use it as a haul-out site. Endangered southern resident orcas and Dall’s porpoises use the nearby waters, and sightings of minke and gray whales are common in the spring and summer.

The island’s seabird nesting sites are some of the most important in Washington and one of the only places in Puget Sound where the number of tufted puffin nests remain constant. It’s also one of only two nesting sites in Puget Sound for the rhinoceros auklet.

Bald eagle numbers have also been increasing there and Minor Island hosts the only ground-nesting pair in the state. Eelgrass, seagrass and macroalgal beds thrive throughout the new aquatic reserve and it encompasses the largest bull-kelp bed in Washington – a habitat essential to the reproductive success of many fish, bird and marine mammal species.