



September 2, 2026

The Honorable Bob Ferguson
Governor of Washington
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 40002
Olympia, WA 98504-0002

**Re: Accountability and Independence in the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission–
Department Relationship**

Dear Governor Ferguson:

I am writing to ask that your office take a broader and more balanced view of the recent investigation involving members of the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission.

I do not ask that legitimate findings against commissioners be ignored. Public-records requirements, open-meetings laws and appropriate standards of conduct matter, and commissioners should be held accountable when those standards are not met.

But a narrowly framed investigation of allegations brought in substantial part by WDFW executive leadership cannot responsibly be treated as a comprehensive account of the institutional conflict at WDFW.

The investigation focused overwhelmingly on the conduct of individual commissioners. It interviewed only eight people: Director Kelly Susewind, Deputy Director Amy Windrope and six commissioners. It did not interview WDFW employees whose alleged treatment figured in the allegations. It did not interview Washington Wildlife First or other conservation organizations whose communications with commissioners became part of the inquiry. Nor was it designed to examine the broader and longstanding deterioration in the relationship between the Commission and Department leadership.

That limitation matters.

The Commission is not simply another component of WDFW management. It is the citizen body statutorily charged with establishing policy, overseeing the Department and appointing — and, where necessary, removing — its director. When serious conflict develops between an oversight body and the executives it is charged with overseeing, accountability cannot reasonably be examined in only one direction.

But I believe there is an even deeper issue your office needs to confront: how this entire controversy began.

This did not begin as a public-records controversy.

It began as a wildlife-policy dispute.

In 2022, after extensive public discussion, the Commission ended Washington's recreational spring bear hunt. That decision was bitterly opposed by national hunting organizations, even though polling conducted at the time found overwhelming opposition to spring bear hunting among Washington voters.

Sportsmen's Alliance, a national hunting, fishing and trapping advocacy organization headquartered in Ohio, became one of the principal forces opposing the Commission. The organization itself now describes its fight with the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission as beginning with the spring-bear decision, although its public campaign against the Commission began even earlier.

Sportsmen's Alliance was not alone.

HOWL for Wildlife, based in California, similarly mobilized hunting advocates from outside Washington to intervene in our state's Commission process. Its 2022 spring-bear campaign explicitly appealed to hunters "across the country" and supplied participants with more than 60 prepared emails they could send or modify when contacting Washington commissioners.

I want to emphasize what troubles me about this.

People and organizations outside Washington certainly have a First Amendment right to express their views. This is not an argument for silencing anyone.

It is a question of influence, proportionality and state sovereignty over our own public-policy process.

An ordinary disagreement over Washington wildlife policy became the starting point for a sustained national advocacy campaign intended to change the direction and composition of a Washington citizen commission.

Sportsmen's Alliance subsequently filed extensive public-records requests seeking commissioners' emails, texts and communications. Its foundation sued WDFW over production of those records. After obtaining thousands of pages of communications, the organization selectively publicized materials and accused commissioners of corruption, collusion and secrecy.

In May 2025, Sportsmen's Alliance formally petitioned your office to remove Commissioners Barbara Baker, John Lehmkuhl, Lorna Smith and Melanie Rowland.

A short time later, your office contracted with an outside investigator. Director Susewind subsequently requested an investigation of members of the very Commission legally responsible for overseeing his agency and his own performance as director. Sportsmen's Alliance materials were among the materials supplied to that investigation.

The resulting yearlong process cost Washington taxpayers approximately \$80,000, with contract authority reportedly extending substantially higher.

And after all of that, the investigator did not recommend the removal or resignation of a single commissioner.

She identified legitimate concerns involving public records, open meetings and other requirements, and those findings should be addressed. But the investigation did not substantiate the sweeping narrative of corruption, unlawful collusion and systemic misconduct that has surrounded these commissioners for years.

That distinction is enormously important.

Your office has now sent Commissioners Lorna Smith and Melanie Rowland formal warning letters threatening removal if they fail to meet specified expectations during the few remaining months of their terms. Those letters were marked **CONFIDENTIAL**, yet your office publicly released them the following day.

I respectfully ask you to explain why.

The practical effect was entirely predictable. Commissioners who have already endured years of personal attacks were publicly branded once again, while the important distinction between actual investigative findings and the far more inflammatory allegations surrounding them was largely lost.

I find that deeply troubling.

And I want to say something about Lorna and Melanie not simply as commissioners, but as human beings.

These are citizen volunteers performing extraordinarily difficult public-service jobs in one of the most polarized areas of state policy. They have sat through meeting after meeting listening to personal attacks, accusations and demands for their removal. They have continued doing the work nevertheless.

Whatever mistakes they may have made — and no public official should be immune from legitimate criticism — they did not deserve to have their reputations subjected to years of insinuations about corruption, dishonesty and conspiracy that the investigation itself does not substantiate.

Your office, Director Susewind and Deputy Director Windrope should take a very hard look at the human consequences of what this process has become.

There is a profound inversion here.

Washington commissioners have been investigated and publicly reprimanded in significant part because of their communications and relationships with Washington conservation and wildlife advocates.

At the same time, national hunting and trapping organizations based outside Washington have spent years applying organized pressure to our Commission process, mobilizing activists nationwide, pursuing commissioners' records, initiating litigation, campaigning publicly for commissioners' removal and helping create the political environment from which this investigation emerged.

Why is one form of advocacy repeatedly characterized as evidence of improper influence while the other appears to be accepted as simply part of the political landscape?

That question deserves an answer.

So does the question of proportionality.

While citizen commissioners have faced extraordinary gubernatorial scrutiny, WDFW itself has confronted documented institutional failures of an entirely different magnitude.

The Washington State Auditor's 2021 performance audit identified serious concerns involving workplace culture, bullying, retaliation, communication failures and employees' lack of confidence in management's ability to address those problems.

Later came devastating workplace-safety failures.

WDFW fisheries biologist Erin Peterson drowned in 2023 while conducting field work. Scientific technician Mary Valentine drowned four months later while working at a fish trap. Other WDFW employees were subsequently involved in another serious river incident.

Washington Labor & Industries ultimately imposed more than \$200,000 in penalties arising from these incidents, including findings involving willful safety violations and failures to provide necessary training for hazardous field work.

I am not suggesting that Director Susewind, Deputy Director Windrope or any other individual should simply be declared personally responsible for those tragedies. That would be precisely the sort of unsupported conclusion I object to when it is applied to commissioners.

I am asking a much more fundamental question:

If citizen commissioners can face removal petitions, a yearlong gubernatorial investigation, formal warning letters and intense public scrutiny over records, meetings and communications with advocacy organizations, why have documented failures involving workplace culture, management accountability, employee deaths and serious state safety citations not produced an equally searching independent examination of WDFW executive leadership?

Why has accountability been directed so overwhelmingly toward one side of this institutional breakdown?

There are also basic questions about the origin and scope of the investigation that I believe your office should answer publicly.

Who first approached your office about investigating members of the Commission?

What communications occurred among WDFW leadership, your office, Sportsmen's Alliance and other outside advocacy organizations before the investigation was commissioned?

What role did the Sportsmen's Alliance removal petition and materials play in defining the allegations and scope of the investigation?

Why was commissioner conduct investigated while the broader deterioration in Commission–Department relations was not?

Why were employees whose alleged treatment was cited in the allegations not interviewed?

Why were conservation organizations whose communications became central to the inquiry not interviewed?

What independent examination has your office conducted of the actions of Director Susewind, Deputy Director Windrope and other members of WDFW executive leadership during this same period?

And what safeguards does your administration believe are necessary to preserve the independence of a citizen commission when the director of the agency it oversees can seek an investigation of his own overseers?

These are not peripheral questions.

They go directly to whether Washington has an independent citizen commission capable of exercising meaningful oversight over a powerful state agency.

A commission cannot fulfill that responsibility if questioning agency recommendations, challenging management, scrutinizing science or disagreeing with a director can ultimately become part of the case for investigating or removing the commissioners themselves.

Oversight that makes executive management uncomfortable is not, by itself, misconduct.

I believe Washington needs a genuinely independent examination of the entire Commission–Department relationship — commissioner conduct, executive leadership, workplace culture, employee safety, scientific and policy disagreements, treatment of advocacy organizations across the ideological spectrum, and the boundary between legitimate Commission oversight and inappropriate operational interference.

I am also working to bring these questions into broader public discussion, including with journalists who cover Washington government and wildlife policy. I am doing so not because I have predetermined what such an examination would find, but because I believe Washingtonians deserve to understand how we arrived at this extraordinary situation.

The story being told about these events begins somewhere in the middle.

The beginning was a disputed wildlife-policy decision.

What followed was a multi-year campaign, significantly driven by organizations outside Washington, to challenge, discredit and ultimately remove members of our state’s citizen wildlife commission.

That campaign intersected with a deteriorating relationship between the Commission and the agency it oversees. Yet the accountability process that followed has examined one side of that relationship with extraordinary intensity while leaving the other largely untouched.

Governor, I respectfully ask you to look at the whole picture.

Commissioners should be accountable for their conduct.

So should the director, deputy director and executive management of WDFW.

And organizations outside Washington should not be permitted to shape our state's wildlife policy through sustained political pressure without Washington citizens understanding the extent of that influence and its consequences.

The state has already spent substantial taxpayer resources investigating individual commissioners. It has exacted an enormous personal and professional toll on people who volunteered to serve Washington.

Surely we now owe Washington citizens — and those commissioners — an equally serious effort to understand the institutional breakdown itself.

Accountability cannot credibly apply in only one direction.

Sincerely,

Ronald D. Reed
Founder/Director
Seven Generations Innovation

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