



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
Pat McCarthy

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights

Assessing the Workplace Culture at the Department of Fish and Wildlife

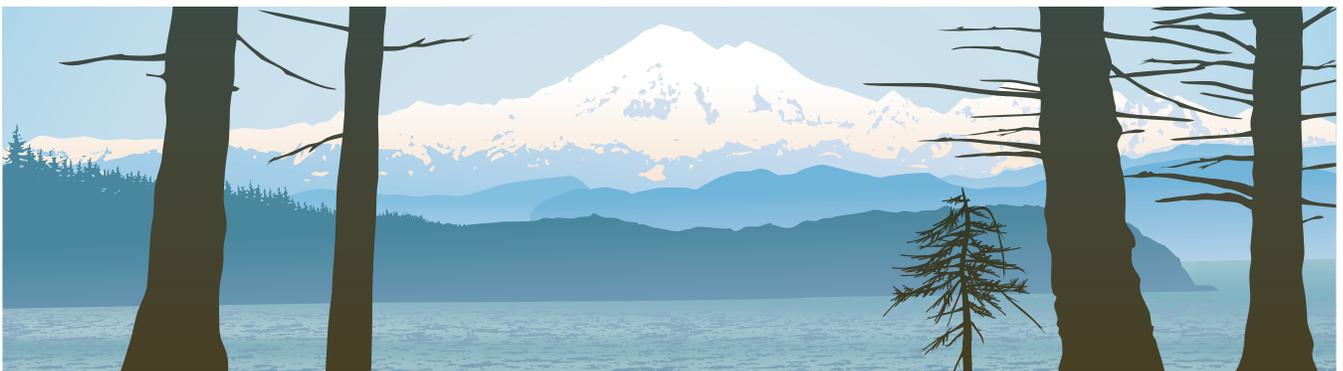
The Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) is responsible for conserving native fish and wildlife and their habitat, while also supporting sustainable fishing, hunting and other outdoor recreational opportunities for Washington residents and visitors. The Office of the Washington State Auditor initiated this audit in response to legislators' concerns about past incidents of sexual harassment, inconsistencies in the way employee complaints are reported and resolved, and practices related to diversity, equity and inclusion. Taken together, these concerns suggested problems might exist within DFW's workplace culture. This audit assessed DFW's culture to determine if there are ways agency leaders can promote a more respectful and productive workplace to enable them to better serve the public.

State Auditor's Conclusions

We conducted this audit in response to publicized incidents of sexual harassment and ongoing concerns from stakeholders about the overall culture at DFW. We did not find evidence of a highly sexualized culture. Instead, the information we compiled showed staff who were committed to and enjoyed many aspects of their work, but who also had real concerns about different forms of unprofessional behavior, communication breakdowns across the agency, and a general lack of confidence in management's ability to address these issues.

Executive management has taken a number of important steps during the past several years to address concerns about the agency's culture. Ongoing initiatives could be strengthened by incorporating some of the leading practices we identified. But the most important thing DFW's leaders must do is maintain their commitment to change. Keep focusing on improvement and don't get discouraged. It takes time to build trust.

DFW employees are passionate about their work and appreciate their close colleagues. They want things to get better, but they are also skeptical that changes initiated by the executive management team have staying power. For real change to take hold, leadership must remain committed to the process it has begun.



At the team level, DFW employees' strong positive views were driven by a sense of meaningful work, camaraderie and confidence in direct supervisors

Most of the DFW employees we communicated with had a positive view of the workplace culture they experienced with their teammates – the people they worked with most closely. The overwhelming majority of DFW employees felt their work was very meaningful. Many DFW employees who frequently work together shared a sense of camaraderie. DFW employees also held mostly positive views of their direct supervisors.

Although sexual harassment was DFW's highest profile problem, survey responses indicate it is not a pervasive issue

DFW has been at the center of high profile cases of sexual harassment in recent years. DFW said that after the two high-profile incidents, addressing this type of behavior and preventing it from happening again has been an agency priority. Survey responses from DFW employees offer some assurance that sexual harassment is not a pervasive issue, as it was the least-reported type of unprofessional behavior. Instead, we identified other more prevalent issues the agency will need to also focus on in addition to continuing efforts to address sexual harassment.

Less positive views of the agency's culture were driven by other types of unprofessional behavior, a perceived lack of accountability and communication challenges

People's opinions about the workplace culture at DFW varied depending on the level of the organization they were describing. Views were somewhat less positive when talking about the agency's overall culture versus when talking about their teams. There are many employees who enjoy their work, coworkers, and immediate supervisor, yet still have concerns about certain aspects of working at the agency. During the course of the audit, we identified three factors that drove negative views of the agency's culture, which were employees' experiences with unprofessional behavior, a perceived lack of accountability and a desire for better two-way communication. Our audit report illuminates their perspectives.

Employees described widespread unprofessional behavior that has not been successfully addressed, diminishing trust in agency leadership

Staff expressed concerns about a variety of unprofessional behaviors at DFW that were unrelated to sexual harassment, but were also less likely to be addressed. The most frequently cited type of unprofessional behavior was bullying in various forms, but employees also described other problematic behaviors, including perceived discrimination, retaliation and legal or ethical violations. When it is not addressed effectively, such unprofessional behavior harms staff morale and wellbeing, affecting workplace culture.

Employees described a pattern of unprofessional behavior that management had not consistently or effectively addressed: among their greatest concerns was a perceived lack of accountability for those behaving unprofessionally at work. The agency's HR department has history of low morale and high turnover, which also contributed to negative staff perceptions around accountability. DFW has taken steps to address the issues within the HR department, including hiring a new director in 2019. The internal culture within HR has shown significant improvement in the last year, but wider agency perceptions take time to change. Clearer policies and procedures for handling complaints could improve staff perceptions of accountability and the reporting process.

DFW has not been consistent in evaluating employee conduct in the past. It is now showing improvement. Increasing opportunities for staff to provide input on supervisor performance could help ensure agency values and expectations are followed. To increase consistency in addressing personnel issues across the agency, managers may need more guidance and training. Finally, consistent and transparent accountability could build trust and encourage more staff to report incidents.

Management can prioritize more open, transparent, two-way communication to strengthen trust and cohesion throughout the agency

The history and structure of DFW have created workplace silos that contributed to communication challenges, which in turn have diminished employee trust in management and hindered cooperation across programs.

Infrequent interaction with management left some staff less confident in the agency's ability to address their needs. Poorly communicated decisions left some staff feeling they could not do their jobs properly. Field staff need to understand the agency's positions and the rationale behind its decisions to effectively communicate with the public and enforce those decisions. Employees also want reassurance that decisions made by management are evidence-based. Some people became less engaged when they felt managers didn't listen or seriously consider their suggestions. Some also believed program silos hindered collaboration and led to inefficiencies.

DFW has taken steps to address silos and communication issues, but it can do more. Implementing leading practices may help it overcome silos and help employees feel more connected.

DFW has taken steps to improve workplace culture, and more can be done to gain staff confidence and ensure long-term success

Since 2017, DFW has taken steps to improve its workplace culture by addressing past incidents and agency challenges. Employees saw these initiatives as positive steps, yet many remained skeptical of lasting improvements. While DFW has laid the foundation, adding leading practices may make it more likely improvement efforts will succeed over time. DFW has so far used few of these practices in its cultural improvement initiatives. Cultural change can take years, so DFW should persist in its efforts.

Recommendations

We made a series of recommendations to the Department of Fish and Wildlife to improve its processes for identifying, reporting and investigating unprofessional behavior, including consequences for unprofessional behavior. We also recommend DFW establish and follow through on improving agency wide communication around workplace behavior and improvement initiatives.