



Wildland Fire and Fuels Science Synthesis: Supporting Landscape and Community Resilience in the Pacific Northwest

Fire Management Considerations for Terrestrial Amphibians in Oregon and Washington Forests

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Introduction

Here I review biological and ecological characteristics of amphibians that are relevant to fuel-reduction treatments in upland forests, summarize the state of empirical knowledge regarding amphibian population responses to forest thinning and fire in the Pacific Northwest, and provide management considerations that balance fuel-reduction objectives with amphibian habitat needs. See Olson and Cousins (in press [in this series]) for amphibian considerations in aquatic and riparian environments. The scope of this review includes forested ecosystems in Oregon and Washington, with an emphasis on the west side of the Cascade Range crest where many at-risk terrestrial amphibians live. I consulted the primary literature on fire and forest management studies involving the terrestrial amphibian species found in the focal region, as well as broader synthesis papers for these topics. I provide species-specific information for the 23 focal amphibians included in this synthesis.

Amphibian Biology and Ecology

Amphibians are foundational members of forest ecosystems in the Pacific Northwest. They serve key functional roles as mid-trophic level predators and as prey for a wide range of vertebrates and invertebrates, contributing to forest nutrient cycling and the movement of energy between terrestrial and aquatic environments. They are ectothermic vertebrates with soft, permeable skin that allows water uptake and gas exchange. Their

Purpose

This synthesis reviews biological and ecological characteristics of amphibians that occur in upland forests of the Pacific Northwest, including fire and forestry studies that are relevant to fuel-reduction, active wildfire, and postfire management.

skin contains a layer of mucous and must remain moist. Amphibians live throughout the Pacific Northwest in streams and rivers, ponds and lakes, and riparian and upland environments. Life histories of individual species can be fully aquatic, semi-aquatic, fully terrestrial, or biphasic (aquatic and terrestrial in different life stages).

Amphibian distribution patterns are strongly tied to species-specific physiological requirements. Although some amphibians have adaptations that allow them to occupy relatively harsh environments, such as desert ecosystems, amphibian species richness at the global scale is highest in regions that are moist, warm, and forested (Buckley and Jetz 2007). This pattern results in particularly high species richness in the Pacific Northwest west of the Cascade Range crest. Some amphibian species are relatively prevalent throughout this portion of the Pacific Northwest, for example, the ensatina (*Ensatina eschscholtzii*), western red-backed salamander (*Plethodon vehiculum*), and Pacific treefrog

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Figure 1—Examples of common forest amphibian species west of the Cascade Range crest in the Pacific Northwest: (a) ensatina (*Ensatina escholtzii*), (b) western red-backed salamander (*Plethodon vehiculum*), and (c) Pacific treefrog (*Pseudacris regilla*). Field studies indicate these species are less vulnerable to fuel-reduction treatments than amphibian species associated with late-successional and old-growth forest conditions. Photos by Donald J. Brown.

(*Pseudacris regilla*) (fig. 1), but most amphibian species have more restricted geographic distributions within the region.

Annual activity periods of amphibians are influenced by species physiology, life history characteristics, and local climates. For example, terrestrial salamanders in the family Plethodontidae are lungless and exchange gases

entirely through their skin and a mucous membrane in the mouth and throat, making them particularly vulnerable to desiccation (Feder 1983). Terrestrial salamanders often exhibit a bimodal annual pattern that reflects suitability of the surface environment, with foraging and reproductive activity peaking in spring and fall when temperatures are moderate and rainfall is prevalent (e.g., Leclair et al. 2008, Peacock and Nussbaum 1973). Eleven fully terrestrial lungless salamanders occur in Oregon or Washington forests, all of which are endemic to the western United States, and six of which are designated as special status/sensitive species by a federal agency (USDI BLM and USDA FS 2022).

Amphibians are largely nocturnal, particularly when on land; this decreases the risk of desiccation and predation. In terrestrial environments, amphibians often occupy subsurface habitats during the day and nonactive periods (summer aestivation and overwintering). This can involve digging into the soil or inhabiting existing burrows, rock crevices, or large down wood. Amphibians respond to temporal changes in subsurface moisture and temperature by migrating vertically through the subsurface (Taub 1961). They forage at night when temperature and moisture conditions are suitable. Foraging activity generally occurs on the ground surface, but some species, such as the climbing salamanders of the plethodontid genus *Aneides*, routinely climb on trees and shrubs (McEntire 2016). When environmental conditions are suitable, they can remain under surface cover, such as moss, down wood, rocks, and leaf litter, during the day.

Space-use patterns are highly variable among amphibian species and are linked to their life history requirements. Some species migrate annually between terrestrial and aquatic habitats to reproduce. This is true for anurans (frogs and toads) and for mole salamanders (genus *Ambystoma*). These biphasic species typically remain within 300 m of breeding wetlands, although some species can travel more than 1 km between activity areas (Semlitsch and Bodie 2003). Alternatively, woodland salamanders (genus *Plethodon*) do not require aquatic habitats to reproduce, and they typically have very small home ranges. Empirical studies rarely document woodland salamanders moving farther than 10 m. For example, a capture-recapture study in Vancouver, British Columbia, documented a maximum relocation distance of 2.47 m for western red-backed salamanders

(Ovaska 1988). However, woodland salamanders are capable of dispersal movements, which enable individuals to respond to microhabitat quality degradation by making small shifts in space. To my knowledge, the longest recorded straight-line distance moved for a woodland salamander is 143 m (Sterrett et al. 2015).

Forest Habitat Relationships

Given their strict microclimate requirements, there have long been concerns about timber harvest (especially clearcutting) resulting in loss, degradation, and fragmentation of amphibian habitats. These concerns were elevated in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Blaustein et al. 1995), and many regional studies were conducted to better understand the influence of stand age on terrestrial amphibian occurrence and abundance (e.g., Bury et al. 1991, Raphael 1988, Welsh and Lind 1991). These studies revealed that many of the region's amphibians were associated with late-successional and old-growth (LSOG) forests. Of these, 18 were included in the Northwest Forest Plan (FEMAT 1993) (table 1).

For LSOG forest-associated amphibian species, silvicultural prescriptions and postharvest microhabitat characteristics can affect populations (see deMaynadier and Hunter 1995). Prescriptions that retain partial canopy cover are often less detrimental than clearcut harvesting because of the maintenance of comparatively cooler and moister microenvironments. For example, in the Willapa Hills of western Washington, Grialou et al. (2000) surveyed salamander communities, comparing ensatina and western red-backed salamander captures in stands that were clearcut or thinned in the previous 2–4 years to captures in control stands that were 45–60 years post-harvest. They detected a strong negative effect of clearcut harvesting, but not thinning, on relative abundance of these terrestrial salamanders. Similarly, researchers did not detect an effect from forest thinning on terrestrial salamander captures in second-growth stands that were thinned in the previous 5–6 years in western Oregon; species-specific detections were primarily associated with distance from streams and the presence of down wood (Kluber et al. 2008, 2009).

Forest microhabitat characteristics have a strong influence on amphibian habitat quality and thus influence pre- and postharvest amphibian occurrence and density. For



Figure 2—Examples of specialist forest amphibian species found west of the Cascade Range crest in the Pacific Northwest: (a) Larch Mountain salamander (*Plethodon larselli*), (b) Siskiyou Mountains salamander (*Plethodon stormi*), and (c) Van Dyke's salamander (*Plethodon vandykei*). These species have restricted geographic distributions and are associated with rocky substrates and late-successional forests; Van Dyke's salamanders are largely restricted to riparian zones adjacent to seeps and streams (see Olson and Cousins, in press [in this series]). Photos by Donald J. Brown (a, c) and William Leonard (b).

example, both Larch Mountain salamanders (*Plethodon larselli*) and Van Dyke's salamanders (*Plethodon vandykei*) are associated with rocky substrates (Jones et al. 2005) (fig. 2), but Van Dyke's salamanders also require high-moisture environments, which largely restricts their

Table 1—Summary of the natural history and fire and forest-management studies of native amphibian species that commonly use upland forest or other terrestrial environments in Oregon or Washington

Species	Sensitive species	Oregon/ Washington	Western/ Eastern	Terrestrial life stages	Terrestrial habitats	Distance from water	Fire studies	Forestry studies
Frogs and toads								
<i>Anaxyrus boreas</i> (western toad)	No	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Juveniles/Adults	Closed forest, open forest, grassland, desert	<2500 m	Barrille et al. 2022, Bull 2006, Cook and Hayes 2020, Guscio et al. 2007, Hossack and Corn 2007, Hossack et al. 2009, Hossack et al. 2013a, Rochester et al. 2010, Vreeland and Tietje 2000	Karraker and Welsh 2006, McIntyre et al. 2025, Raphael 1988
<i>Anaxyrus woodhousii</i> (Woodhouse's toad)	Yes	Yes/Yes	No/Yes	Juveniles/Adults	Grassland, shrubland	<2000 m		
<i>Ascaphus truei</i> (coastal tailed frog)	No (NWFP)	Yes/Yes	Yes/No	Juveniles/Adults	Closed forest	<100 m		Bury 1983, Corn and Bury 1991, Karraker and Welsh 2006, Olson and Ares 2022, Olson and Burton 2014, Olson and Rugger 2007, Olson et al. 2014, Raphael 1988, Raphael et al. 2002, Rundio and Olson 2007
<i>Lithobates pipiens</i> (northern leopard frog)	Yes	Yes/Yes	No/Yes	Juveniles/Adults	Grassland, shrubland, open forest	<250 m		
<i>Pseudacris regilla</i> (Pacific treefrog)	No	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Juveniles/Adults	Closed forest, open forest, grassland	<1500 m	Cook and Hayes 2020, Rochester et al. 2010, Vreeland and Tietje 2000	Bury 1983, Olson et al. 2014, Raphael 1988
<i>Rana aurora</i> (northern red-legged frog)	No	Yes/Yes	Yes/No	Juveniles/Adults	Closed forest	<300 m	Cole et al. 1997	Corn and Bury 1991, Olson and Ares 2022, Olson and Burton 2014, Olson et al. 2014
<i>Spea intermontana</i> (Great Basin spadefoot)	No	Yes/Yes	No/Yes	Juveniles/Adults	Grassland, shrubland, open forest	<350 m		
Salamanders								
<i>Ambystoma gracile</i> (northwestern salamander)	No (NWFP)	Yes/Yes	Yes/No	Juveniles/Adults	Closed forest, open forest	<1000 m		Corn and Bury 1991, Grialou et al. 2000, Olson and Burton 2014, Olson et al. 2014, Raphael 1988, Rundio and Olson 2007
<i>Ambystoma macrodactylum</i> (long-toed salamander)	No	Yes/Yes	Yes/Yes	Juveniles/Adults	Grassland, shrubland, open forest	<600 m (Stemle 2024)	Hossack and Corn 2007, Hossack et al. 2013a, 2013b	Naughton et al. 2000, McIntyre et al. 2025
<i>Ambystoma tigrinum</i> (eastern tiger salamander)	No	Yes/Yes	No/Yes	Juveniles/Adults	Grassland, shrubland, open forest, desert	<250 m		
<i>Aneides ferreus</i> (clouded salamander)	No (NWFP)	Yes/No	Yes/No	All	Closed forest, open forest, talus	N/A	Chelgren et al. 2011, Stephens 2023	Bury 1983, Corn and Bury 1991, Olson and Burton 2014, Olson et al. 2014, Raphael 1988
<i>Aneides flavipunctatus/klamathensis</i> (black salamanders) ^a	Yes (NWFP)	Yes/No	Yes/No	All	Closed forest, open forest, talus	N/A		Raphael 1988

Table 1—Summary of the natural history and fire and forest-management studies of native amphibian species that commonly use upland forest or other terrestrial environments in Oregon or Washington (continued)

Species	Sensitive species	Oregon/ Washington	Western/ Eastern	Terrestrial life stages	Terrestrial habitats	Distance from water	Fire studies	Forestry studies
<i>Batrachoseps attenuatus</i> (California slender salamander)	No	Yes/No	Yes/No	All	Grassland, shrubland, open forest, closed forest	N/A		Bury 1983
<i>Batrachoseps wrighti</i> (Oregon slender salamander)	No (NWFP)	Yes/No	Yes/No	All	Closed forest, talus	N/A	Chelgren et al. 2011, Stephens 2023	Olson and Burton 2014, Olson et al. 2014, Rundio and Olson 2007
<i>Dicamptodon copei/</i> <i>tenebrosus</i> (giant salamanders)	Yes (<i>copei</i>); No (<i>tenebrosus</i>) (NWFP)	Yes/Yes	Yes/No	Adults (non- paedomorphic)	Closed forest	<50 m (McComb et al. 1993)	Cole et al. 1997	Corn and Bury 1991, Grialou et al. 2000, Johnston 1994, Karraker and Welsh 2006, Olson and Ares 2022, Olson and Burton 2014, Olson and Rugger 2007, Olson et al. 2014, Raphael 1988, Raphael et al. 2002, Rundio and Olson 2007
<i>Ensatina eschscholtzii</i> (<i>ensatina</i>) ^b	No	Yes/Yes	Yes/No	All	Closed forest, open forest, talus	N/A	Chelgren et al. 2011, Cole et al. 1997, Rochester et al. 2010, Stephens 2023, Vreeland and Tietje 2000	Bury 1983, Corn and Bury 1991, Grialou et al. 2000, Karraker and Welsh 2006, Kluber et al. 2008, Olson and Ares 2022, Olson and Burton 2014, Olson and Kluber 2014, Olson et al. 2006, Olson et al. 2014, Raphael 1988, Raphael et al. 2002, Rundio and Olson 2007
<i>Plethodon elongatus</i> (Del Norte salamander)	No (NWFP)	Yes/No	Yes/No	All	Closed forest, talus	N/A	Major 2005	Diller and Wallace 1994, Karraker and Welsh 2006, Raphael 1988
<i>Plethodon larselli</i> (Larch Mountain salamander)	Yes (NWFP)	Yes/Yes	Yes/No	All	Closed forest, open forest, talus	N/A		
<i>Plethodon stormi</i> (Siskiyou Mountains salamander)	Yes (NWFP)	Yes/No	Yes/No	All	Closed forest, open forest, talus	N/A		
<i>Plethodon vehiculum</i> (western red-backed salamander)	No	Yes/Yes	Yes/No	All	Closed forest, open forest, talus	N/A	Chelgren et al. 2011, Cole et al. 1997, Stephens 2023	Corn and Bury 1991, Grialou et al. 2000, Kluber et al. 2008, Olson and Burton 2014, Olson and Kluber 2014, Olson and Rugger 2007, Olson et al. 2014, Raphael et al. 2002, Rundio and Olson 2007, Wilk et al. 2014
<i>Taricha granulosa</i> (rough- skinned newt)	No (NWFP)	Yes/Yes	Yes/No	Juveniles/Adults	Closed forest, open forest, grasslands	<400 m	Cole et al. 1997, Cook and Hayes 2020	Corn and Bury 1991, Grialou et al. 2000, Karraker and Welsh 2006, Olson and Ares 2022, Olson and Burton 2014, Olson and Rugger 2007, Olson et al. 2014, Raphael 1988, Rundio and Olson 2007

Note: Occurrences of species are indicated for the western and eastern sides of the Cascade Range crest. Sensitive species include species listed as sensitive by the Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Region regional forester or the state director of Oregon or Washington as of 2021; species included in the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP) are noted (FEMAT 1993). The table is restricted to species that often occur >30 m from water in one or more life stages, excluding long-distance dispersal movements. Except where noted, geographic distribution and natural history information was derived from species reviews by Dodd (2023) for frogs and toads, Petranks (1988) for salamanders, and regional amphibian field guides (Corkran and Thoms 2006, Jones et al. 2005). Distance from water refers to the distance from waterbodies where terrestrial activity of aquatic-breeding amphibians is prevalent, it does not represent the maximum observed distance from water. Fire studies and forestry studies provide references to studies that included sampling data or inferred effects on species in terrestrial environments.

N/A = species do not reproduce in aquatic habitats.

^a The species found in Oregon was historically referred to as *Aneides flavipunctatus* (black salamander) but was changed to *Aneides klamathensis* (Klamath black salamander) by Reilly and Wake (2019).

^b The subspecies found in Oregon and Washington is *Ensatina eschscholtzii oregonensis* (Oregon ensatina). Source for species names: Nicholson (2025).

local distributions to riparian zones adjacent to seeps and streams (McIntyre et al. 2006; see Olson and Cousins, in press [in this series] for additional information on Van Dyke's salamanders). Many habitat characteristics that are important for individual species are intrinsic to the location, such as elevation and aspect (which influence temperature and precipitation), slope, and soil type. Other important habitat characteristics can be directly influenced by management actions, regardless of location. This is particularly true of live and dead vegetation structure and complexity.

Many studies in the Pacific Northwest have focused on the influence of large down wood on amphibian habitat. In managed forests in the Oregon Cascade Range, Butts and McComb (2000) found strong positive relationships between ensatina captures and the volume of large down wood, and between ensatina presence and percentage of cover of logs >50-cm in diameter. Biek et al. (2002) noted that the clearcut sites had substantial large down wood (2000–3000 logs/ha) and hypothesized that retaining extensive large down wood reduced habitat degradation from loss of canopy cover. Other regional studies have provided additional support for this hypothesis (e.g., Aubry et al. 1988, Corn and Bury 1991, Kroll et al. 2015, Maguire et al. 2005, Raphael 1988).

Subcanopy live vegetation can directly affect microhabitat quality by influencing moisture dynamics and structural features that are used for cover and foraging, and indirectly by influencing invertebrate prey availability (Burrow and Maerz 2022). For example, Kluber et al. (2008) found that moss cover was an important microhabitat component for ensatina in the western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) vegetation zone of the Oregon Coast Range. Furthermore, Butts and McComb (2000) found that ensatina captures were positively associated with the percentage of fern cover and speculated that the relationship was a proxy for a positive association with the percentage of understory vegetation cover in general. Positive associations between understory vegetation cover and occurrence or abundance of amphibian species in upland forests have also been documented for several other species in the Pacific Northwest, including rough-skinned newt (*Taricha granulosa*), Larch Mountain salamander, and western red-backed salamander (Crisafulli et al. 2008, Maguire et al. 2005).

Research Gaps

- Few empirical studies have been conducted on upland amphibian responses to fire in the Pacific Northwest, limiting knowledge of species-specific responses and fire severity effects.
- Long-term empirical studies of upland amphibian responses to fuel reduction treatments are lacking in the Pacific Northwest, limiting the ability to predict expected population recovery times.

Responses to Fire

Relatively few studies have assessed terrestrial amphibian responses to fire across North America (see Anjos et al. 2021, Hossack and Pilliod 2011, Pilliod et al. 2003, Russell et al. 1999). Individual studies have reported negative, positive, or undetectable responses across different amphibian species, environments, and fire severities. Some studies suggest that fire does not typically result in substantial direct mortality (Brown et al. 2014a, Pilliod et al. 2003), but changes to important habitat conditions, such as overstory canopy cover and the presence of large down wood, can be strongly influenced by fire severity (e.g., Brown et al. 2014b, Halofsky et al. 2011). Although studies may report short-term negative impacts, the use of prescribed fire management in fire-suppressed forests is expected to have long-term benefits for many amphibian species (Pilliod et al. 2003, Russell et al. 1999).

Only a few studies have assessed upland amphibian responses to fire in the Pacific Northwest. Chelgren et al. (2011) used a control-impact approach to assess postfire responses of five terrestrial salamander species approximately 2 years after a wildfire in a mature Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*)/western hemlock forest in western Oregon. They estimated that occupancy probability was lower in burned plots than control plots for all five species, but the fire effect was weak relative to the influences of topographic position and elevation. Stephens (2023) used a control-impact approach to assess ensatina responses to high-severity wildfires in mature coniferous forests in three regions of western Oregon, with recent (4–8 years postburn) and older (19–34 years postburn) wildfires included in the study. They estimated that

plot occupancy and abundance was higher in unburned plots than in recently burned and older burned plots, and that plot occupancy and abundance were positively associated with the amount of large down wood. Similarly, a fire-response study in California that focused on the Del Norte salamander (*Plethodon elongatus*) also found that occupancy probability in burned plots was positively correlated with the amount of large down wood (Major 2005). In addition, Major (2005) reported that the density of large down wood was negatively correlated with fire severity. Collectively, these studies suggest that high-severity wildfires often reduce terrestrial habitat quality for amphibians in the Pacific Northwest, with measurable impacts to populations.

Management Considerations

Creation of firebreaks and roads can result in direct amphibian mortality and long-term habitat degradation; postfire restoration actions such as revegetation can reduce these impacts (see Pilliod et al. 2003).

Given their highly permeable skin, the use of fire retardants is also of concern for toxicity to amphibians (e.g., Lanctôt et al. 2024, Ozeri et al. 2021). The final environmental impact statement for the nationwide aerial application of fire retardant on national forest system land (USDA FS 2011) recommends not using fire retardant in critical habitat areas for sensitive amphibian species and prohibits use of fire retardants in critical habitat areas in national forests for some species that are federally listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA 1973). Furthermore, concentrating use of fire retardants on ridgelines can maximize protection of watersheds while limiting the species directly impacted by the chemicals (USDA FS 2011: app. O).

Although experimental investigations of upland amphibian responses to postfire salvage logging are lacking, Pilliod et al. (2003) speculated that salvage logging may be more detrimental to amphibians than nonfire timber harvest because of greater soil disturbance. The fire and forestry studies reviewed here also suggest that as burned forests regenerate, large down wood maintains microhabitat conditions that support persistence of LSOG-associated amphibians in suboptimal burned habitats.

Because of their low dispersal rates, if terrestrial amphibian populations are extirpated in managed forest stands, it can take decades to centuries for recolonization.

Balancing fuel-reduction needs with maintenance of important microhabitat features will promote persistence-in-place for affected amphibian populations (Thurman et al. 2020), thus benefitting long-term ecosystem health. When forest thinning is required for fire risk reduction, retaining partial overstory canopy and large down wood have been shown to reduce negative impacts of timber harvest on amphibians (e.g., Cafferata Coe et al. 2021, Clayton et al. 2009, McIntyre et al. 2025, Pilliod and Wind 2008). Given the benefits of retaining down wood, fine fuels, and understory vegetation, salvage logging and mastication treatments that hinder this could severely degrade habitat for amphibians in upland forests.

Conservation assessments and strategies focused on forest-associated amphibian species of concern in the Pacific Northwest promote a management strategy focused on habitat preservation. These focal species are typically habitat specialists with restricted local

Key Takeaways

- Amphibians are a foundational component of healthy forest ecosystems in the Pacific Northwest, playing key ecological roles for food webs and energy transfer among water, land, and air.
- For amphibian species that are associated with late-successional and old-growth forest conditions, fuel-reduction treatments can result in habitat degradation with measurable negative effects. These effects can be ameliorated by retaining canopy cover and large down wood and by reducing the use of large equipment, which compresses soil in amphibian habitats.
- During wildfires, keeping fire-retardant use and fire-break construction away from critical amphibian habitats can minimize effects on dispersal-limited and federal agency special status/sensitive species.
- After wildfire, retaining existing trees and large down wood can provide cool, moist microclimate conditions and microhabitat refugia for terrestrial amphibians.

distributions, therefore management limitations in high-quality habitat areas do not prevent the application of fuel reduction treatments across the surrounding landscape. For example, the conservation strategy for Siskiyou Mountains salamanders (*Plethodon stormi*) and Scott Bar salamanders (*Plethodon asupak*) in the Klamath National Forest recommended that fuel-reduction treatments focus on nonhabitat and low-quality habitat areas (Cuenca and Jones 2023). If fuel-reduction treatments are necessary in occupied, high-quality habitat patches, they recommend following specific guidelines that minimize habitat degradation, such as retaining an average of 70 percent canopy cover in the highest quality habitat areas and restricting prescribed burning to nonactive periods (i.e., summer aestivation and overwintering). Species-specific guidance documents are available for regional species of concern through the Interagency Special Status/Sensitive Species Program (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r6/issssp/>), such as for the Siskiyou Mountains salamanders in Oregon (Olson et al. 2007: app. 4), Larch Mountain salamanders (Crisafulli et al. 2008), and Oregon slender salamanders (*Batrachoseps wrighti*) (Clayton and Olson 2009).

U.S. Standard Equivalents

When you know:	Multiply by:	To find:
Centimeters (cm)	0.394	Inches
Meters (m)	3.28	Feet
Kilometers (km)	0.621	Miles
Hectares (ha)	2.47	Acres

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