

Agenda Item Summary

BACKGROUND

In 2000 the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) purchased 848.98 acres adjacent to the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area (LMWA). The RMEF purchased this property for \$725,000. Referred to as the Glass Hill Winter Range this parcel of land lies west of Foothill Road in the Starkey Wildlife Management Unit adjacent to a 160 acre parcel owned by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), see attached map. Prior to the acquisition, RMEF approached ODFW and inquired about our interest in the property, at that time we expressed a desire to assist RMEF in any way and to move forward with the acquisition however, funds were not available to complete the acquisition. Over the last nine years several attempts have been made to acquire the property and each has failed for various reasons.

In 2000, ODFW signed a Memorandum of Understanding to manage the property for RMEF. ODFW staff applied for Access and Habitat funds to improve habitat for upland birds, deer, elk and sensitive species. Over \$150,000 in both private and state funds have been expended for restoration and management of the land since RMEF purchased the property. Activities on the property continue with ODFW and many volunteers spending hundreds of hours planting trees, maintaining perimeter fences, removing interior fences, maintaining the barn, seeding desirable plant species, spraying noxious weeds and implementing hunt programs.

The Glass Hill Winter Range is classified as both critical big game winter range and critical wildlife habitat by the Union County Land Use Plan. The property is primarily mid-slope native timbered rangeland in an area that is experiencing recreational and residential development pressure in the form of small ranches that are 80 acres to several thousand acres. Adjacent to this property development of the smaller ranches is evident with realtor marketing diverse properties of smaller sizes with open space timber, meadows, water amenities, views and wildlife. The Glass Hill Winter Range has all of the listed aspects for attracting interest in dividing the property into smaller lots. County Zoning in the area sets a minimum lot size of 240 acres.

Acquisition of the Glass Hill Winter Range would help meet the goals of the Oregon Conservation Strategy by protecting a Strategy Habitat, Ponderosa Pine Woodlands that is a priority for the Ecoregion. The property is home to several Strategy species including black-backed, American three-toed, Lewis', pileated and white-headed woodpeckers; fringed myotis, long-legged myotis and great gray owl. The acquisition further addresses two of the six Key Conservation Issues in the Strategy: Land Use Changes, a priority for the Blue Mountains Ecoregion, and Barriers to Fish and Wildlife Movement.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Glass Hill Winter Range has been discussed with four adjacent landowners and all have supported the purchase provided current management is not changed significantly. A Union County Commission representative (Steve McClure) was contacted and he supported the ODFW acquisition, provided in lieu taxes continue to be paid. ODFW annually pays \$8524 per year to Union County for property tax at Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area.

ISSUE 1

1. Acquisition of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation property, critical big game winter range and critical wildlife habitat which would be protected and enhanced for present and future generations.

ANALYSIS

The Glass Hill Winter Range property has the potential to be subdivided into three parcels. Currently there are a small number of elk that reside on the property year round (approximately 120). With larger numbers using the property as winter range (up to 500 head) residential homes would have a negative impact on big game use of the property. Additionally, more residences would likely result in increased damage complaints.

The property borders the Glass Hill Conservancy which is approximately 1500 acres in size. The Conservancy is owned by Dr. Joel Rice and is currently enrolled under a conservation easement with the RMEF insuring that the property be managed as wildlife habitat. The combined Glass Hill Winter Range and Glass Hill Conservancy is 2349 acres of critical big game winter range and critical wildlife habitat which would be protected and enhanced for present and future generations.

Acquisition of this property meets the stated objectives in the following ODFW documents:

1. Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area Plan adopted 2008.
2. Mule Deer Plan, adopted 2003.
3. Elk Management Plan adopted 2003.
4. The Oregon Conservation Strategy adopted 2006.

A private sale of the RMEF property could be detrimental to the habitat which currently exists at Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area. To protect and preserve this natural resource asset, and to further accomplish the mission of the Department of Fish and Wildlife, ownership of the RMEF property, would be a valuable addition to the State of Oregon.

OPTIONS

1. Approve the acquisition of the RMEF property as an addition to the Ladd Marsh Wildlife Area.
2. Forfeit the opportunity to acquire the RMEF property.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Approve the acquisition of the RMEF property and direct staff to proceed to escrow closing upon completion of the due diligence processes required under Oregon Administrative Rules for land acquisitions.

DRAFT MOTION

I move to approve the purchase of the RMEF property and direct staff to proceed to escrow closing upon completion of the due diligence processes required under Oregon Administrative Rules for land acquisitions.

EFFECTIVE DATE

October 2, 2009