

## Agenda Item Summary

### BACKGROUND

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife owns or manages by agreement nearly 200,000 acres of land in more than 20 wildlife areas for wildlife use and public recreation. Oregon's wildlife areas serve the needs of wildlife as well as wildlife-oriented recreation and public hunting access. Establishment and maintenance of wildlife areas and other resource properties is an integral part of ODFW's Mission to "protect and enhance Oregon's fish and wildlife and their habitats for use and enjoyment by present and future generations."

#### **Lower Deschutes Wildlife Area**

The Lower Deschutes Wildlife Area (LDWA) encompasses roughly 8,500 acres owned or administered by ODFW in Sherman and Wasco Counties along the Deschutes River. The LDWA was established to ensure access to the lower 18 miles of the river in perpetuity. The LDWA provides essential habitat for a wide suite of species, including mammals, birds, listed fish species, reptiles and amphibians. Deer and bighorn sheep viewing is very popular. Bird watching is excellent all year. Native habitats include sagebrush steppe, grasslands, riparian, and aquatic. The entire LDWA is in Conservation Priority Area 3 (CP-03) in the Columbia Plateau ecoregion as outlined in the Oregon Conservation Strategy (OCS). Management of the LDWA is consistent with the goals and strategies outlined within the OCS for the species and habitats of greatest concern.

The riparian areas along the Deschutes provide excellent habitat for many bird species and the riverine habitats are essential salmonid habitat. Upland areas provide important habitat for passerines and game species such as pheasant, chukar, quail and wild turkeys. The area is equally important to many species of migratory songbirds and raptors during breeding and nesting periods.. The LDWA provides wildlife-oriented recreational activities including viewing, photography, bird watching, horseback riding, camping, fishing and hunting.

#### **Relevance to Plans and Strategies**

The 10-year long range plan for LDWA (2009) includes evaluating opportunities for acquisition of inholdings and adjacent acres to achieve goals and objectives outlined in the plan. The OCS is an "...overarching state strategy for conserving fish and wildlife", designed to "...use the best available science to create a broad vision and conceptual framework for long-term conservation of Oregon's native fish and wildlife...". The location of this acquisition is within a Conservation Opportunity Area of the Columbia Plateau ecoregion, identified in the OCS. Management within LDWA is driven to specifically address the four recommended conservation actions addresses by OCS CP-03; addressing in-channel watershed function, invasive weeds, sage habitats, and riparian habitats.

## **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

One public meeting was held in The Dalles to provide information on the proposed land acquisition and garner public input.

The project has been presented to the Wasco County commission on three occasions. Information and status of the acquisition has been presented the last three years at the district tag meeting, as well as multiple local forums.

This acquisition was included as Policy Option Package 128 of the 2015 legislatively approved ODFW budget. It was also discussed within the legislative emergency board process in 2014 to gain permission to apply for federal grant dollars. Information on the proposed acquisition was presented in late July to the Public Lands Advisory Committee (advisory role to Department of Administrative Services).

## **ISSUE 1**

1. Acquisition of the River Ranch property from the Trust for Public Land to be included into the Lower Deschutes Wildlife Area.

## **ANALYSIS**

The proposed acquisition consists of approximately 10,198 acres within Wasco county. The property is currently owned by the Trust for Public Land (TPL), who recently completed a fee title purchase from the Limmeroth family trust. This purchase was initiated in the spring of 2013, when TPL signed a purchase option on the River Ranch with the thought of potentially using the property as a mitigation site for a proposed energy development. In collaboration with the Mid-Columbia ODFW district office, TPL pursued multiple grant opportunities to facilitate the acquisition of this property to include it into the current LDWA.

This parcel further enhances the Department's ability to manage species and habitats within the Deschutes river canyon. In addition to the current OCS habitats being managed on the area, this parcel also contains the easternmost remnant stand of Oregon White Oak in Wasco County. It is also the only major private parcel that is heavily used by bighorn sheep in the Deschutes river. It serves as approximately 50% of the core home range for one of the two West Deschutes ram groups. In addition, there are two documented spawning and rearing streams for listed Mid-C steelhead on the property, allowing for greater access to restoration under ODFW ownership.

The addition of this parcel to LDWA will enhance public access to approximately 15,000 acres of adjacent BLM land, and facilitate increased public access to over 20 river miles along the Deschutes.

Long range planning efforts for the River Ranch will be undertaken in collaboration with local landowners, sportspeople, and outdoor enthusiasts. Discussions will include development of habitat/species related goals, objectives and strategies as well as funding partnerships, grazing, and restoration efforts. Much communication has already occurred with adjacent landowners, and actions will begin immediately after final acquisition to address concerns of increased potential of private land trespass, provide

coordinated enforcement with OSP, and direct outreach for recreational opportunities. Management activities on the parcel will be accomplished through a collaborative effort utilizing staff from White River WA, LDWA, and the Mid-Columbia wildlife district office.

Final funding for this project came from a wide variety of sources, with six different grantors and two mitigation accounts coming together to fund the acquisition. No ODFW license funds will be used towards the purchase of this property. As with other ODFW properties, the Department will pay in-lieu of taxes.

**OPTIONS**

1. Approve the acquisition of the River Ranch from the Trust for Public Land.
2. Take no action

**STAFF  
RECOMMENDATION**

Approve the acquisition of approximately 10,198 acres in Wasco county to benefit habitat restoration and public access and direct staff to proceed to escrow closing upon completion of the due diligence processes required under Oregon Administrative Rules for land acquisition.

**DRAFT MOTION**

I move to approve the River Ranch acquisition and direct staff to proceed to escrow closing upon completion of the due diligence processes required under Oregon Administrative Rules for land exchanges.

**EFFECTIVE DATE**

August 7, 2015