

Summary of Projects Recommended for Funding

The Access and Habitat (A&H) Board met in Salem July 19, 2016 to review projects requesting funding. A project must receive at least four supporting votes to be recommended for Commission approval. A brief description of the projects, funding requested, access and habitat benefits provided, as well as Board votes is summarized below. If major issues were raised they are also discussed.

The A&H Board recommends funding the following projects:

#2016-15 Desolation Creek LLC Access Area

- Annual Project Cost: \$86,892/year
 - A&H Funds: \$32,256/year
 - Cooperator Cost Share: \$54,636/year
- Total Project Cost: \$260,676 (three year agreement)
 - A&H Funds: \$96,768 (total request)
 - Cooperator Cost Share: \$163,908 (total for three years)
- Applicant: Ecotrust Forest Management
- Location: John Day Watershed, Desolation WMU
- Access Acres: 13,440
- Access Duration: Year round; October 2016- September 30, 2019
- Board Vote: Yes: 7; No: 0

The Desolation Creek LLC Access Area will provide year round “Welcome to Hunt” access to 13,440 acres of private land from October 1, 2016 to September 30, 2019. The A&H Program would reimburse the landowner \$32,256 per year for 3 years. Cooperator funds are in-kind cost share over the 3-year period for a Natural Resource Manager hired by Ecotrust Forest Management (EFM) to oversee day-to-day operations at the Desolation Creek property. The positions public use related activities include closing roads, monitoring use, developing campsites, and directing use away from sensitive areas. The position also manages commercial resources for the property by identifying timber stands for treatment, conducting pre and post-harvest cruises to monitor progress toward desired future conditions, and collaborating with other organizations for habitat improvement projects such as fish habitat restoration along Desolation Creek.

A variety of hunting opportunities exist on the property, including mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, blue and ruffed grouse, California quail, turkey, bear, cougar and coyote. The property is surrounded by Umatilla National Forest land, allowing game and hunters to move freely between Desolation Creek LLC land and the surrounding public property. Motorized vehicle use, including ATVs, is coordinated between the properties to prevent resource damage from traffic on unimproved roads and sensitive areas.

In 2014, EFM purchased the mixed forest and grasslands property and developed the Desolation Creek Land Management Plan with a goal of establishing resilient forestlands. The plan aims to; reduce fuel loads, improve forest diversity and complexity, rehabilitate riparian zones and improve wildlife habitat. Rangelands have been evaluated and grazing systems designed to improve range health as well as other terrestrial and aquatic habitats.

During the 2015-2016 seasons, the Department installed four Access Area Daily Permit stations on the property. The permits are voluntary and underrepresent use of the property. Of the 213 permits collected, 151 were complete. The completed permits show 46% of hunters were after big game, 34% were pursuing upland birds/turkey, 17% were shed hunting/recreating or scouting for hunting season, and 7% were predator hunting. The majority of respondents gave the property a very satisfied rating (5) on a scale of 1-5, with 5 indicating most satisfied. The average satisfaction rating for the collection period was 4.06.

#2016-16 Hancock Forest Management NE

- Annual Project Cost: \$450,000/year
 - A&H Funds: \$100,000/year (40% of requested funds)
 - Open Fields Funds: \$150,000/year (60% of requested funds)
 - Cooperator Cost Share: \$200,000 (details below)

- Total Project Cost: \$2,250,000 (five year agreement)
 - A&H Funds: \$500,000 (total request)
 - Open Fields Funds: \$750,000 (total obligation)
 - Cooperator Cost Share: \$1,000,000 (total for five years)

- Applicant: Hancock Forest Management NE
- Location: Grande Ronde and John Day Watersheds, includes portions of ten WMU's
- Access Acres: 250,000
- Access Duration: Year round; January 2017-December 2021

Currently, there are five Cooperative Travel Management Areas (TMAs) covered by existing A&H grant agreement funding which will expire on December 31, 2016. These agreements provide \$73,638 in annual funding for an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) technician to patrol and manage access to approximately 180,000 acres of Hancock Forest Management NE (HFM) property.

This project proposal would pay HFM \$250,000 a year, for year round access to 250,000 acres of private timberlands in northeast Oregon starting January 1, 2017 and running through December 31, 2021. The project will be funded 60% by Oregon Open Fields funds (federal funds through the Voluntary Public Access/Habitat Improvement Program) and 40% from Access and Habitat Funds. Annually, HFM's cost share to the project will include; private security at a cost of \$68,000, road and gate repair and maintenance costs estimated at \$60,000, grazing revenue deferment to improve big game forage at around \$60,000, as well as \$12,000 in administrative costs.

For nearly 40 years, HFM has partnered with ODFW to provide hunting access and create habitat in northeast Oregon. Hancock Forest Management's livestock grazing program is currently running at approximately 70% of capacity; stocking rates and densities across HFM lands are well below the accepted average for private lands in NE Oregon. HFM's land base is composed of year round big game habitat, with a strong emphasis on winter range. With livestock stocking rates being low, the remaining forage supports enhanced big game numbers and in many areas current grazing practices across HFM's lands condition forage for use by wildlife, particularly elk.

In addition to grazing practices that benefit grassland species of wildlife, HFM's active timber management has promoted early seral plant communities throughout many of the forested acres. These early seral plant communities are of particular importance to deer populations. Having adequate browse species on the landscape provides important forage for both mule deer and white-tailed deer. With mule deer populations being low in most areas of the west, including Oregon, any habitat work that benefits populations should be encouraged. With limited active timber management occurring on adjacent public lands, early seral plant communities are somewhat limited in distribution across forested habitats.

The five established TMAs provide limited vehicle access and reduced disturbance of wildlife. The security and solitude these TMAs provide, continues to attract and hold big game animals for longer portions of the year. Combining high quality forage with reduced disturbance, HFM lands are providing significant habitat benefits, helping to reduce damage complaints on adjacent private lands, and improving hunter success and satisfaction throughout several big game management units. During the last several years, HFM has also enhanced public access to an additional 70,000 acres where hunters have historically recreated, and increased access and use of adjacent public lands (see attachment 5 for map of Hancock lands).

The importance of HFM lands to hunters is difficult to measure precisely. But given the improved habitat these properties provide compared to most public lands, and the experience of the biologists who check hunters in WMUs that include HFM lands, these lands attract more hunters than their percentage of the WMU would suggest. Using the Sled Springs WMU as an example, HFM owns ~ 30% of the private land (25% of the entire WMU). We estimate about 40% of the big game hunters (1,500 of 3,700 hunters) in the sled Springs Unit utilize HFM lands. The estimate, which Department Biologists for the area believe is conservative, is that for all the areas included in this proposal, over 3,500 of the 16,000 deer and elk hunters hunt on HFM lands. In addition, there are bear, cougar, and grouse hunters that hunt these lands. For the 2015 season, harvest data for the Sled Springs WMU show 49% of the deer and elk hunters in the WMU reported successfully taking an animal, with 128 six point+ bull elk and 310 four point+ deer harvested.

HFM lands in northeast Oregon are popular with the hunters from throughout the state. In 2016, of the 7,088 applicants for deer and elk hunts in the Sled Springs WMU:

- 3,228 (46%) were from eastern Oregon
- 3,508 (49%) from western Oregon
- 352 (5%) from nonresidents

This project proposal was unanimously supported by the Access and Habitat Northeast Region Council (Council) and by each of the Department Wildlife Biologists in NE Oregon with HFM property in their Districts. The Board deliberated the proposal including consideration of the quality of the hunting, amount of access, long history with our hunters, landowner's cooperation with the Department on research and management of fish and wildlife and strong support of the Wildlife Districts, the Board unanimously recommended Commission approval of the project. A significant factor in the discussion was the opportunity to partner the funding with the federal Open Fields grant award. The access acreage expectations for A&H and Open Fields programs will be well achieved and still have capacity for continued funding of habitat and/or access projects by the regional councils.

Funding this project will ensure continued public access to 250,000 acres of private timberlands and continue the decade's long relationships with HFM, the Department, and our hunting community.