



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Since the 1970's, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (department) and our partners have pursued opportunities to acquire a high conservation and recreation value property along the Minam River in northeast Oregon. More recently, the department has partnered with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) and Hancock Natural Resource Group (HNRG) on an agreement to acquire the 15,573 acre property.

The Minam River property, managed by HNRG, is located at the confluence of the Minam and Wallowa Rivers (see map in Attachment 2). The property is primarily located in Wallowa County (15,500 acres), with a small portion in Union County (73 acres). The property presents an opportunity to connect large areas of public land, being located adjacent to the department's existing 440-acre Minam River Wildlife Area, the Wallowa Whitman National Forest, Minam State Recreation Area (managed by Oregon Parks and Recreation Department) and lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

The property has significant conservation value for a variety of different species and habitats identified in the Oregon Conservation Strategy. There are four federal and state listed threatened or endangered aquatic species located in the nearly six miles of the Minam River, and there are over 120 miles of perennial and intermittent streams located on the property. There are seven priority habitats, 15 strategy species that have been observed, and modeling shows an additional 23 strategy species likely to occur. The property is also critical wintering area for Rocky Mountain elk and mule deer, as well as year-round habitat for other popular game species such as black bear, ruffed and blue grouse, and wild turkey. The river corridor and lowland forest habitat represents the only point of forest connectivity between the Wallowa and Blue Mountains, making the property an important wildlife corridor for species movement and genetic flow for climate change resiliency.

In addition to the high conservation value, the property provides numerous high-quality consumptive and non-consumptive recreation opportunities. This includes hunting, fishing, hiking, horseback riding, birdwatching, kayaking, and other non-motorized activities compatible with maintaining the fish and wildlife values of the property. One unique feature of the property is the historic Minam River Trail which used to start at Highway 82 and travel approximately six miles through the property before entering the Eagle Cap Wilderness. This project would re-establish the historic trailhead location to allow access to the current trail, which is used by an estimated 2,500 people annually.

If approved by the Commission, the acquisition will occur in two phases, both of which will go through separate Commission approval processes. Phase I totals 4,609 acres of forest and rangeland adjacent to the existing wildlife area. This phase also includes 0.8 miles of frontage on the Wallowa River. Phase II totals 10,964 acres that includes almost six miles of the Minam River and adjacent Minam River trail.

An appraisal conducted in 2019 estimated the value of the property at \$18,700,000, with Phase I valued at \$5,508,354 and Phase II at \$13,191,646. An appraisal update is nearing completion to confirm the Phase I value and another update will occur in 2023 to establish the Phase II purchase price.

The primary funding for the acquisition will come from RMEF private donations (\$5.15M), ODFW apportionment of Pittman-Robertson funds (\$3.1M) and an application for a USDA Forest Legacy Program grant (\$9.7M). The remaining funding will be accomplished through donations from other sport/conservation groups, private donations, grants, and other department funds as needed.

All revenue generated from future forest management activities or the existing livestock grazing lease will be utilized for wildlife area operations and maintenance. Pursuant to statute (ORS 496.340), the department will pay “in lieu of taxes” on all applicable properties so there is no loss in tax revenue to Wallowa and Union Counties. The department will also pay the full fire protection fee to Oregon Department of Forestry to continue wildland fire protection on the property.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

It is the department’s policy to conduct public meetings, inform local civic clubs, angler/hunter groups, resource industry groups, local private landowners, and contact local governments and legislators to provide information and garner public input on land acquisitions prior to seeking approval from the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission.

Staff met individually with Wallowa and Union County Commissioners, as well as numerous state legislators. Contacts were also made with stakeholder groups, agriculture industry representatives, tribes, and other interested parties.

Department staff presented information about the proposed acquisition at a local public meeting conducted virtually on July 13, 2021. The department issued a press release for the meeting that was carried by local media outlets and directly provided to local governments and other interested parties. Information was mailed to neighboring landowners with an invitation to contact or meet with staff individually to answer questions or hear concerns.

Public outreach included information about when the acquisitions would be presented to the Public Lands Advisory Committee (July 22, 2021) and the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission. Attachment 2 includes an informational flyer that was provided in all outreach.

ISSUE 1

Purchase Minam River Phase 1 (4,609 acres), for incorporation into the Minam River Wildlife Area.

ANALYSIS

The department seeks approval from the Commission by agency policy for all land transactions valued over \$100,000 (fair market value). *Policy Number ASD-19, November 17, 2000.*

Incorporating Minam River Phase I into the Minam River Wildlife Area serves many needs:

- Protects and enhances a variety of Strategy Species and Habitats as identified in the Oregon Conservation Strategy
- Protects critical winter range for Rocky Mountain Elk and mule deer
- Provides abundant consumptive and non-consumptive outdoor recreation opportunities
- Restores and protects historic use of the Minam River Trail used to access the Eagle Cap Wilderness
- Provides positive economic benefits to local communities of Wallowa and Union County
- Maintains a “working landscape” approach that utilizes forest management and livestock grazing as a tool to enhance wildlife habitat

ISSUE 2

Funding – Acquisition and Long-term Operations.

ANALYSIS

Acquisition of Phase I will primarily be accomplished through \$1,650,000 in RMEF private donations and \$3,100,000 of the department’s apportionment of Pittman-Robertson funds. RMEF and the department are actively working with other organizations, such as the Oregon Hunters Association, to secure the remaining funds needed to close in December 2021.

Future operation and maintenance of the Minam River Wildlife Area will be conducted by the existing Grande Ronde Wildlife Area Program and funded primarily through Pittman-Robertson funds.

ISSUE 3

Future Management and Access.

ANALYSIS

Following closing of Phase II in 2023, the department will begin developing a wildlife area management plan that will provide a framework for how the property will be managed. Development of the management plan will involve a public review process that will culminate with Commission review and adoption.

Administrative and public access is an important consideration with all lands purchased by the department. The property has a well established and maintained gravel road system that provides sufficient access for administrative purposes. Public vehicular access to the property will be provided through a county road that enters the north end of the property and another county road that creates the eastern boundary of the property.

OPTIONS

1. Approve the department moving forward with acquisition of the Minam River Phase I property.
2. Take no action.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Approve the acquisitions of the Minam River Phase I property, approximately 4,609 acres in Wallowa County, and direct staff to proceed to escrow closing upon completion of all processes required under Oregon law for land acquisition.

DRAFT MOTION:

I move to approve the acquisition of the Minam River Phase I property, approximately 4,609 acres in Wallowa County, and direct staff to proceed to escrow closing upon completion of all processes required under Oregon law for land acquisition.

Effective Date: *August 6, 2021*