



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The Oregon legislature created the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund (OCRF) in early 2019. The OCRF Advisory Committee makes recommendations to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission and the department regarding the use of fund moneys for implementing and administering OCRF projects.

This agenda item pertains to an OCRF project titled “Trout Creek Ranch and Pueblo Mountains Conservation Area.” The applicant for this project is the Oregon Desert Land Trust, who acquired lands in the project area in July 2021 and is planning for fish and wildlife habitat restoration and long-term protection of lands in the Trout Creek Mountains Conservation Opportunity Area.

The Commission reviewed this project on June 17, 2022, when they approved the OCRF Advisory Committee’s recommendation to fund a \$50,000 grant to purchase fencing as part of the larger Trout Creek Ranch and Pueblo Mountains Conservation Area project.

Since that time, private donors have contributed \$550,000 to the OCRF in restricted private donations to go toward making a payment toward principle on a loan held by Oregon Desert Land Trust that was obtained to purchase properties in the project area. In addition to accessing these private restricted donations, Oregon Desert Land Trust has requested OCRF matching funds (in the amount of \$160,000), as outlined in the OCRF Expenditure Framework. The OCRF is dedicated to the public-private partnership model for funding by continuing to raise private funds to help implement the Oregon Conservation Strategy and fulfill our broad mandate. The matching of private donations leverages the donor’s gift not only to help achieve our overall goals but also accelerates progress on projects that have direct nexus to the Oregon Conservation Strategy.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

OCRF Advisory Committee meetings are open to public participation and have time on the agenda for comments from participating members of the public.

ISSUE

Conservation and Recreation Fund Expenditure Recommendation for the special project request “Trout Creek Ranch and Pueblo Mountains Conservation Area.”

ANALYSIS

Oregon Desert Land Trust has partnered with the Nature Conservancy (TNC) to acquire the 16,688-acre Trout Creek Ranch and over 500,000 acres of grazing permits on adjacent public land. The lands were purchased in July 2021, through a loan in the amount of \$13,610,290. The Land Trust and TNC raised over \$13,000,000 to acquire the ranch and planned for a five-year acquisition phase to discharge the loan. This project will pay a portion (grant amount of \$715,000; including \$550,000 in private restricted donations) of the remaining land loan principal (remaining balance of approximately \$1,307,470). This will allow the retirement of the loan debt early and expedite Oregon Desert Land Trust restoration efforts on the land.

The project provides conservation benefits including wildfire mitigation through grazing plans and habitat connectivity between more than one million acres of existing conservation lands. This project spans three watersheds and includes a variety of habitats such as aspen woodlands, grasslands, creeks, wet meadows, and sagebrush-steppe. These lands are home to a wide variety of plant and animal species native to the Great Basin including several listed in the Oregon Conservation Strategy as priority species of interest to the State of Oregon.

Discharging the loan earlier will allow the Land Trust and its partners to implement habitat restoration actions with their existing funds sooner than originally called for in their five-year acquisition and restoration plan. The restoration efforts on the property of interest will advance several local and regional conservation plans including the Oregon Sage Grouse Action Plan, the Recovery Plan for Lahontan Cutthroat Trout, the Southern Oregon-Northeastern California Working Wet Meadows Initiative, and the Oregon Conservation Strategy and Audubon Important Bird Areas. Some of the activities that will occur include removal of old fencing, restoration of native grasses, forbs, shrubs, and trees in floodplains, grasslands, and sagebrush, and decommissioning of old buildings.

The OCRF Subcommittee on Special Projects met on September 2 to review the proposal, and on September 12 the OCRF Advisory Committee recommended unanimously an expenditure of \$715,000 (which includes a \$550,000 restricted private project donation and \$160,000 in OCRF matching funds) from the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund for the Special Project “Trout Creek Ranch and Pueblo Mountains Conservation Area.”

The OCRF Advisory Committee is seeking the Commission’s approval for this special project expenditure.

OPTIONS

1. Approve Conservation and Recreation Fund expenditure recommendation from the OCRF Advisory Committee.
2. Reject Conservation and Recreation Fund expenditure recommendation from the OCRF Advisory Committee.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Approve Conservation and Recreation Fund expenditure recommendation from the OCRF Advisory Committee.

DRAFT MOTION:

I move to approve expenditure from the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund of up to \$715,000 for the project “Trout Creek Ranch and Pueblo Mountains Conservation Area” contingent upon the receipt of restricted donations of \$550,000.

Effective Date: October 14, 2022