



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Since the 1970's, the Department and its 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 Manulife (formerly Hancock Natural Resource Group) on an agreement to acquire the 15,573 acre property.

The Minam River property, managed by Manulife, 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, Wallowa Whitman National Forest, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department Minam State Recreation Area 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 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 a 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 in the face of a changing climate.

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 with the main trail, which is used by an estimated 2,500 people annually.

The acquisition has been staged over two phases. In August 2021, the Commission approved the acquisition of Phase I which included 4,609 acres of forest and rangeland. The acquisition closed later that year and has been managed as the Minam River Wildlife Area.

Phase II of the acquisition will be presented for Commission consideration at the September 15, 2023 meeting. Phase II includes 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 Phase II property at \$13,191,646. An appraisal update is nearing completion to confirm the Phase II value. The update was not finalized in time for the Commission packet but will be available by the time of the Commission meeting.

The primary funding for the Phase II acquisition will come from RMEF private donations (\$3.5M) and a USDA Forest Legacy Program grant (\$9.7M). If the appraised value of the property increases from the 2019 appraisal, the remaining balance will be funded using ODFW apportionment of Pittman-Robertson funds and/or additional private donations from RMEF.

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, fishing and hunting groups, resource industry groups, local private landowners, local governments, and legislators to provide information and gather public input on land acquisitions prior to seeking approval from the 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. Attachment 2 includes an informational flyer that was provided in all outreach.

The Public Lands Advisory Commission met on July 27, 2023 to review the proposed Phase II acquisition. The committee unanimously recommended the acquisition move forward.

ISSUE 1

Purchase Minam River Phase II (10,964 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 II 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 II will be accomplished through \$3,500,000 in RMEF private donations and a \$9,700,000 USDA Forest Legacy Program grant. Any additional funding necessary to close based on the updated appraisal will come from ODFW apportionment of Pittman-Robertson funds and/or additional private donations from RMEF.

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, 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 acquisition of the Minam River Phase II property.
2. Take no action.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Approve the acquisitions of the Minam River Phase II property, approximately 10,964 acres in Wallowa and Union Counties, 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 II property, approximately 10,964 acres in Wallowa and Union Counties, and direct staff to proceed to escrow closing upon completion of all processes required under Oregon law for land acquisition.

Effective Date: *September 15, 2023*