



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Created in 1993 by the Oregon Legislative Assembly, the seven-member Access & Habitat (A&H) Board (Board) reviews project proposals that improve wildlife habitat and/or enhance public hunting access in Oregon. Project applications, submitted by landowners, corporations, organizations, and agencies, are initially reviewed by Board-appointed Regional Councils established in five geographic regions of the state. Regional Councils forward proposals to the Board with recommendations to approve or deny projects. The Board provides the next level of project review and then forwards proposals to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) for final consideration and approval to expend A&H Program funds.

Funding for the A&H Program, approximately \$3.3 million per biennium, is from three primary sources:

- \$4 from each hunting and combination license sold (approximately \$1.4 million per biennium)
- Proceeds from the annual Big Game Auction and Raffle tags (approximately \$1.9 million per biennium)
- Biennial allocation of approximately \$90,000 from the Green Forage and Deer Enhancement and Restoration programs

The A&H Program dedicated account balance was \$3,722,069.68 at the end of September 2024. A&H Program funds deposited in the dedicated account can only be expended for program activities. As of November 1, contracted A&H projects provide hunters with access to over 2.4 million acres of private land and have improved over 21,000 acres of habitat for wildlife during this biennium.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A&H provides an opportunity for public involvement at Regional Council and Board meetings, which are advertised by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (department) news releases and on the department webpage. Meeting materials are posted on the department website and members of the public may review documents and submit comments. Interested parties may attend in person or virtually to provide public comment during these meetings. The Board most recently met in Enterprise on October 22, 2024.

ISSUE 1

A&H PROJECT FUNDING RECOMMENDATION

ANALYSIS

2024-06 Open Fields Access Projects Extension and Block Grant

- Open Fields Funds \$664,000
- A&H Funds: \$64,383
- Applicant: ODFW on behalf of Open Fields cooperators
- Location: Defined by each project
- Access Acres: ~504,000 acres
- Habitat Acres: ~1,000
- Project Duration: December 2024 - June 2026
- Board Vote: Yes: 7; No: 0

Oregon Open Fields projects are funded via a Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) grant. VPA-HIP is part of the Federal Farm Bill. Despite continued delays in passage of the Federal Farm Bill by congress, the department was awarded an additional \$664,000 from the NRCS for our VPA-HIP grant to serve as a temporary stop gap. All VPA-HIP grant funds must be expended by September 1, 2025.

This project facilitates spending out our VPA-HIP grant in two ways. First, the project will extend the current Open Fields access projects for one year through the 2025-26 hunting season. The projects needing extension are the Fort Rock Access, four Willamette Valley Access projects, three Columbia Basin Access projects, two Mid Coast Access projects, and two northeast Oregon projects. Extending these projects ensures continued access to roughly 504,000 acres for a total cost of \$579,445 from Open Fields and \$64,383 from A&H funds. The A&H program is required to withhold payment of 10% of the total funds for each project until the project completion report is received. As project completion reports for these projects will not occur until after the Sept. 1, 2025 VPA-HIP expenditure deadline, the final 10% payment for each project will occur with A&H Funds as shown in the table above. Maps of the access projects are included in Project Maps (Attachment 2).

The second portion of this project proposal would expend the remaining funds of the extended Oregon Open Fields grant (VPA-HIP funds only) through approval of a block grant that will utilize an expedited project application approval process. The block grant allows project application review and approval by the A&H Coordinator and Wildlife Division Administrator. All projects funded through the block grant must be consistent with the original VPA-HIP funding proposal submitted to the NRCS. The focus of the block grant will be on habitat work and all funded projects must be completed by September 1, 2025. To remain compliant with the

VPA-HIP funding requirements, block grant projects must occur on private property that allows public access and the habitat work must benefit a game species on the property. There is an estimated \$84,555 available for habitat work through the block grant. However, if any cooperators with Open Fields funded access projects choose not to re-enroll their properties for the one year extension, additional funds may become available for the block grant up to a maximum of \$163,000.

OPTIONS

Option 1. Approve A&H Board recommendation.

Option 2. Reject project proposal.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Option 1. Approve the project recommended by the A&H Board.

DRAFT MOTION:

I move to approve the Open Fields Access Projects Extension and Block Grant recommended for funding by the Access & Habitat Board.

Effective Date: December 13, 2024