



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

In 2010, the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) and the State of Oregon signed an agreement to settle BPA wildlife habitat mitigation obligations in the Willamette Valley. The agreement guarantees more than \$117 million for fish and wildlife habitat protection through the acquisition of real property, purchasing a minimum of 16,880 acres of important native habitats in fee title or via conservation easements. The agreement extends from 2010 to 2025, and also provides for the implementation of a long-term account to fund habitat maintenance for the program when the agreement expires. A minimum of 10 percent of the project funding will also benefit ESA-listed anadromous fish species through habitat protection. To accomplish the habitat protection mitigation objective, BPA and the State of Oregon established the Willamette Wildlife Mitigation Program (WWMP), managed by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (the Department).

Most properties acquired by the WWMP are not acquisitions held by the Department, but instead are funded by BPA and held by outside parties such as land trusts, tribes, and other governmental agencies. However, in-holdings and lands adjacent to existing Department wildlife areas in the Willamette Valley are targeted for Department acquisition when appropriate. Staff is proposing three such acquisitions for Commission approval.

Relevance to Plans and Strategies

All three proposed South Coyote IV, V, and VI acquisitions are located within the [West Eugene Area Conservation Opportunity Area \(COA ID: 086\)](#) identified in the [Oregon Conservation Strategy](#) (OCS 2016). The West Eugene Area COA extends from Camas Swale north along the foothills to Cox Butte and includes the West Eugene wetlands and Fern Ridge Reservoir. This COA contains some of the largest remaining fragments of the Willamette Valley's native wet prairies. Acquisition of these three sites will contribute to the protection and restoration of important habitats in decline and will facilitate management of the adjoining Fern Ridge Wildlife Area (FRWA) due to consolidation of boundaries and efficiencies of scale. All three of the properties fall within a [Priority Wildlife Connectivity Area](#) identified through ODFW's [Oregon Connectivity Assessment and Mapping Project](#). Protection of existing high functioning habitat, and restoration and enhancement actions that result in high functioning habitat, are consistent with the Department's Climate and Ocean Change Policy. Public ownership of these sites will provide increased wildlife-oriented recreational opportunities.

South Coyote IV

This 79.4-acre property is adjacent to FRWA's South Coyote Unit, protected by the WWMP in 2013. The appraised purchase price is \$486,750. The Department is requesting an additional \$129,294 from BPA to offset long-term operations and maintenance costs. Acquisition of this property will contribute to the conservation and enhancement of 44.8 acres of wetland habitat and 34.6 acres of flowing water and riparian habitat in the region.

Acquisition of this property would fill a strategic gap in protected ownership along Coyote Creek. In addition to its strategic location and proximity to FRWA, the Department prioritized this acquisition based on the OCS habitats and species that will benefit from its protection. This acquisition will provide habitat for a variety of wildlife, including amphibians, reptiles, raptors, migratory birds, and waterfowl. Its protection and restoration will allow for increased habitat connectivity between the on-site wetlands and flowing water and riparian habitat and large blocks of priority habitats located on adjacent protected sites to the east and north (FRWA's South Coyote and East Coyote units). Microhabitat connectivity may provide an adaptive measure in a changing climate. This landscape-level habitat conservation has the potential to benefit OCS Strategy Species, including northern red-legged frogs, northwestern pond turtle, willow flycatcher, yellow-breasted chat, and waterfowl including dusky Canada goose. The acquisition facilitates several of the recommended conservation actions identified in the OCS for the West Eugene Area COA.

The property is zoned Exclusive Farm Use. The property has historically been used for hay and grass production and private recreational waterfowl hunting. All 79.4 acres are classified as High Value Farmland based on soil type. The property has been largely unused for the past several years. Existing structures on the property include a barn-like structure in disrepair, exterior and interior fencing, approximately 2,600 linear feet of levee, a water control structure, several culverts, a shed, and five hunting blinds. The property is accessed from Halderson Road to the west and Cantrell Road to the north. The property has no water rights, though the Department would seek to obtain water rights for the wetland impoundment to the benefit of fish and wildlife. The 2024 annual Lane County property taxes were \$117.96. The Department plans to pay "in lieu of taxes" to Lane County.

The acquisition will eventually make possible the restoration of 44.6 acres of wetland wet prairie and seasonal pond habitat, and 34.6 acres of flowing water and riparian habitat. The current and permitted land uses are conducive to restoration activities; restoring site hydrology will contribute to wet prairie habitat both on this site and on the adjacent South Coyote unit. No impediments to vehicle or equipment access are apparent. If approved, the Department plans to purchase the property by September 30, 2025, as an addition to Fern Ridge Wildlife Area. The Department would initiate a formal management planning process following acquisition.

Permanent protection of this property will provide an opportunity to restore wetland hydrology within an existing complex of conservation lands. The planned trajectory for this property is to improve conditions of the wetland impoundment and restore the existing pasture to native wetland to benefit a variety of OCS Strategy Species and provide increased climate resiliency by providing high functioning habitats consistent with adjacent South Coyote. The flowing water and riparian habitat will be protected, and conditions improved through invasive species treatments.

South Coyote V

This 56.74-acre property is adjacent to FRWA's South Coyote Unit. The appraised purchase price is \$340,500. The Department is requesting an additional \$92,395 from BPA to offset long-term operations and maintenance costs for the property. This property acquisition will contribute to the conservation, enhancement and restoration of 49.2 acres of flowing water and riparian habitat and 7.54 acres of wetlands. The habitats on this property are generally in good condition, mostly requiring control of invasive species in coordination with maintenance and enhancement actions. Limited active restoration is necessary.

Similar to South Coyote IV, habitat connectivity is a major reason this acquisition was prioritized, as well as the OCS habitats and species that will benefit from its protection which include those identified for South Coyote IV. Protection of South Coyote V will allow for increased habitat connectivity between existing protected lands (FRWA's South Coyote Unit to the west and the City of Eugene's Coyote Prairie wetland mitigation bank to the east), further enhancing landscape-level habitat conservation and improved climate resiliency in the area.

This property is zoned Exclusive Farm Use and all 56.74 acres are classified as High Value Farmland ("farmland of statewide importance") based on soil type. The historic use of the property determined via aerial imagery (1960's-present) indicate that minimal tree clearing and small portions of agriculture have occurred, namely an approximately 2.8-acre field in the northwest corner of the site. Four acres beneath BPA powerlines are mowed regularly. The remaining nearly 50 acres of the property remain largely unfarmed and unused, with the riparian habitat and understory in good ecological condition overall. There are three culverts on the property that may require improvement or replacement. Because boundary fencing surrounding the property largely borders adjacent public lands owned by ODFW and the City of Eugene, fencing will either be improved as necessary or removed.

Access to the property is from Cantrell Road to the north via a gravel right-of-way access easement road, and overland from FRWA's South Coyote Unit to the west. The property has no water rights. The 2024 annual property taxes were \$51.68. The Department plans to pay "in lieu of taxes" to Lane County.

If approved, the Department plans to purchase the property by early 2025 as an addition to Fern Ridge Wildlife Area.

South Coyote VI

This approximately 86-acre property is also adjacent to FRWA's South Coyote Unit. The appraised purchase price is \$517,800. The Department is requesting an additional \$140,530 from BPA to offset long-term operations and maintenance costs for the property. This property acquisition will contribute to the conservation, enhancement and restoration of approximately 34 acres of flowing water and riparian habitat, 43 acres of wetlands, and 9 acres of oak woodlands.

The flowing water and riparian and oak woodland habitats on this property are generally in good condition, mostly requiring control of invasive species in coordination with maintenance and enhancement actions. The wetlands on the property will require more active restoration, as they are currently held in agriculture for hay production.

Habitat connectivity is again a major reason this acquisition was prioritized, as well as the OCS habitats and species that will benefit from its protection. In addition to the habitats and species identified for South Coyote IV and V, South Coyote VI contains approximately 9 acres of oak woodlands which is expected to benefit additional associated OCS species such as acorn woodpecker, chipping sparrow, and white breasted nuthatch. Protection of South Coyote VI will allow for increased habitat connectivity between existing protected lands (FRWA’s South Coyote Unit to the west and the City of Eugene’s Coyote Prairie wetland mitigation bank to the north), further enhancing landscape-level habitat conservation and improved climate resiliency in the area.

This property is zoned Exclusive Farm Use and approximately 85 out of 86 acres are classified as High Value Farmland (“farmland of statewide importance,” or “prime farmland if drained”) based on soil type. The historic use of the property includes pasture and hay production. The riparian habitat and oak woodlands are in good ecological condition overall. There are culverts on the property that may require improvement or replacement, and two ponds that could be improved for wildlife habitat use. Boundary fencing surrounding the property will be improved as necessary or removed where bordering existing protected lands.

This property acquisition requires a lot line adjustment that will affect the final habitat acreage. The current owner must retain 40 acres total to adhere to property zoning laws. Public access to this property is walk-in only from the adjacent South Coyote Unit to the west. Management access will be provided through a private roadway easement. Water rights associated with the property have not been exercised or reported in the past 5 years. Any current water rights will be purchased with the property and dedicated instream or used to the benefit of fish and wildlife. The 2024 annual property taxes were \$3,818.05, which includes a homesite (excluded from the acquisition). The Department plans to pay “in lieu of taxes” to Lane County.

Attachment 2 includes maps showing locations of the South Coyote IV, V, and VI properties within the context of FRWA.

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 Fish and Wildlife Commission.

Department staff presented information about the proposed acquisitions of South Coyote IV, V, and VI at a publicly advertised stakeholder meeting conducted virtually October 15, 2024. Directed outreach for the stakeholder meeting targeted local and regional agency staff, conservation and hunting organizations, the local Farm Bureau representative, county, state and federal elected officials or their staff, and stakeholders who had previously attended similar meetings.

The Department issued a press release for the stakeholder meeting, and included links to supplemental material, including several options for how to provide comments. In addition,

social media outreach (NextDoor) conducted before the stakeholder meeting targeted the Veneta area.

The Department's Willamette Wildlife Mitigation Program website linked to information, the stakeholder meeting presentation, the web portal for comments, and information about when the acquisitions would be presented to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission.

Attachment 3 includes a letter to neighbors and interested parties and fact sheets provided as part of the outreach packet.

Attachment 4 includes public correspondence received as of November 1, 2024.

ISSUE 1

Purchase South Coyote IV, V, and VI Additions (222 acres total), for incorporation into the Fern Ridge 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 South Coyote IV, V, and VI into the Fern Ridge Wildlife Area serves many needs:

- Contributes to settling the mitigation obligation outlined in the Willamette River Basin Memorandum of Agreement Regarding Wildlife Habitat Protection and Enhancement between the State of Oregon and the Bonneville Power Administration (October 22, 2010)
- Maintains the existing nearby habitat investments by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and Ducks Unlimited.
- Restores and increases protections for a variety of Strategy Species and Habitats as identified in the Oregon Conservation Strategy
- Enhances the ability to manage species and habitats at Fern Ridge Wildlife Area, with particular emphasis on climate adaptation and resiliency
- Direct, positive impact on outdoor recreation opportunities
- Educational opportunities
- Positive economic benefits to the local communities and Lane County

ISSUE 2

Funding – Acquisition and Maintenance

ANALYSIS

The acquisition funding and a significant portion of operation and maintenance funding for these projects will come from the Willamette Wildlife Mitigation Program funded by the Bonneville Power Administration. No Department license funds will be used towards the purchase of these properties.

The existing WWMP budget and personnel will provide funding and management of the properties through the duration of the Program. Long-term management will be under Fern Ridge Wildlife Area.

Lane County will receive the same amount of tax revenue from the Department as it currently receives from the private landowners. Pursuant to statute, the Department will pay “in lieu of taxes” on all applicable properties (ORS 496.340).

ISSUE 3

Public Access

ANALYSIS

Administrative and public access is an important consideration with all lands to be purchased by the Department. Public access to the properties will be consistent with that allowed for the South Coyote Unit of FRWA, which includes general access and hunting access at various times of year.

OPTIONS

1. Approve the acquisitions of the South Coyote IV, V, and VI properties.
2. Take no action.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Approve the acquisitions of the South Coyote IV, V, and VI properties, approximately 222 acres in Lane 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 acquisitions of the South Coyote IV, V, and VI properties, and direct staff to proceed with escrow closing upon completion of all processes required under Oregon law for land acquisition.

Effective Date: *December 13, 2024*