



# WESTERN RIVERS CONSERVANCY

February 27, 2024

Reva Gillman, Coordinator  
Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund  
4034 Fairview Industrial Drive SE  
Salem, OR 97302

Dear Reva,

Western Rivers Conservancy (WRC) is grateful for the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund's \$50,000 grant, awarded on February 5, 2023, for the McDonald's Ferry: Preserving habitat, history and recreation on the Lower John Day River project. We are pleased to provide this [Project Completion Summary](#).

## Project Overview:

Reliable, cold water—it's everything in the arid shrub-steppe of north-central Oregon, where the John Day River reigns over a wild landscape that is disappearing across the West. Dam-free for all its 280 miles, the John Day is home to the healthiest populations of wild summer steelhead in the Columbia basin. To survive, these steelhead rely on a handful of cold tributary streams that flow steadily into the John Day, even during summer months. Stream by stream, WRC is buying large, private ranches that hold the principal cold-water tributaries to the lower John Day and



*McDonald's Ferry Ranch and the John Day River.*

include strategic river and hike-in access, opening world-class recreational opportunities for anglers, hunters, boaters, hikers and wildlife enthusiasts. In July 2020, WRC purchased the McDonald's Ferry Ranch, located seven miles downstream of Cottonwood Canyon State Park, which we established with Oregon State Parks in 2013. The 4,054-acre property spans 3.2 miles of the John Day River and 2.6 miles of Grass Valley Canyon Creek, offering the chance for another significant conservation and recreation win for the John Day.

Steeped in history, McDonald's Ferry Ranch is named for an old ferry that carried Oregon Trail pioneers across the shallow river ford of the John Day. The native grasslands and sagebrush remaining on the ranch are part of a larger landscape that is dwindling across the West, one that supports an array of animals that face significant habitat loss. These include burrowing owl, ferruginous hawk, grasshopper sparrow, loggerhead shrike, sagebrush lizard, pronghorn, mule deer and Oregon's largest herd of California bighorn sheep.

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Grass Valley Canyon Creek was historically a productive spawning tributary for steelhead, but its lower channel was moved to make way for agriculture decades ago, impacting fish habitat and limiting fish passage. Conveying the property to the BLM creates the potential for future restoration and reconnection of the creek with the river.

Critically for boaters and anglers, the project secures permanent access to the last boater take-out on the lower John Day, which makes possible the seven-mile float from the northern edge of Cottonwood Canyon State Park. Below the ranch, the river winds into a long roadless reach and then careens over the un-runnable Tumwater Falls. Private land ownership also complicated visitor access to Oregon Trail interpretive sites at McDonald's Ferry. By placing the land in public hands, WRC removed the threat of its private sale, which could have restricted access indefinitely. The project is also a big win for hikers, hunters and other recreationists, who now have new access to the property's gentle three-mile reach of the John Day and the arid, rolling uplands above the river.

### **Project Successes:**

We are very pleased to report that WRC, in partnership with the Bureau of Land Management, permanently conserved McDonald's Ferry Ranch, protecting 3.2 miles of the Wild and Scenic John Day and 4,054 acres of sagebrush and grassland habitat. After WRC purchased the ranch in 2020, we held and managed the property for three years while working to secure funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. With funding secured in 2023, WRC completed final real estate due diligence work including an appraisal and environmental site assessment. We also coordinated with the BLM State Office and the Solicitor's Office at the federal level to process the transaction. Final management activities and preparation of the property for conveyance to BLM included weed treatments, removal of irrigation lines, general property clean up, fence repairs and signage installation.

In August 2023, we successfully conveyed the property to the BLM for inclusion in the John Day Wild and Scenic River Corridor, conserving a broad expanse of Oregon's sagebrush country, three miles of the John Day and creating new recreational access along this stretch of river in perpetuity.

### **Conclusion:**

The McDonald's Ferry project has been a major win for Oregon's fish, wildlife and people alike. Support from the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund brought the project over the finish line, ensuring that rare habitats are protected and connected, guaranteeing public access to boating, hiking, hunting, fishing, and historic Oregon Trail interpretive sites, and restoration opportunities can be realized. Thank you for your support, it has truly made a difference.

Sincerely,



Sue Doroff  
President