

Land Protection Plan

Bear River Watershed Conservation Area

Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming

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Prepared by

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Summary



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Mountains and marshes at Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, Utah.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is establishing a conservation area for the Bear River watershed in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. The Bear River Watershed Conservation Area project will work with private landowners to establish up to 920,000 acres of voluntary conservation easements:

- to conserve aquatic, riparian, wetland, and upland habitats;
- to provide wildlife habitat connectivity and migratory corridors;
- to maintain healthy populations of native wildlife species;
- to protect and maintain water quality and quantity;
- to increase the watershed's resiliency during climate and land use changes;
- to conserve the area's working landscapes;
- to promote partnerships for coordinated watershed-level conservation.

To successfully implement the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area, the Service will work with the three landscape conservation cooperatives that encompass the project area—Great Northern, Great Basin, and Southern Rockies Landscape Conservation Cooperatives. In addition, the Service will coordinate conservation efforts throughout the Bear River watershed with numerous partners: The Nature Conservancy, Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, local Audubon chapters, PacifiCorp, State and local land trusts, soil and water conservation districts, State agencies, tribes, and other Federal agencies.

The Service has developed a land protection plan for the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area. The plan focus throughout is analysis and coordination of conservation easements in the Bear River watershed at a landscape scale. The plan describes the important resources and heritage of the watershed and gives direction for evaluating potential easement properties.

Service staff at the three wildlife refuges in the Bear River watershed—Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge (Idaho), Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge (Utah), and Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge (Wyoming)—will administer and monitor the conservation easement program.

The Bear River Watershed

The Bear River is the largest river in the Western Hemisphere that flows into an inland sea—the Great Salt Lake. The river originates in the Uinta Mountains and flows north and west in an arc from Utah, through Wyoming and Idaho, and back into Utah. In the course of its 500-mile journey, the Bear River passes through three national wildlife refuges: Cokeville Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, Bear Lake National Wildlife Refuge, and Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge.

The wide range of altitudes in the Bear River watershed allow for diverse habitats. Grassland and shrubland dominate the flats and the lowlands, while pinyon–juniper woodland and pine forest cover the higher slopes. Big sagebrush is common on much of the landscape, although other shrubs such as rabbitbrush, saltbush, and greasewood may dominate some areas.

Most of the lower elevation areas are privately owned, with much of the land in the wide valleys used for agriculture and grazing. Bear River water is used extensively to irrigate alfalfa, small grain crops, and ranchland.

Future activity in the Bear River watershed is expected to include commercial oil and gas development, mining, wind energy development, and residential development, along with an associated increase in water demand.

How Conservation Easements Work

To protect habitat, the Service recognizes that it is essential to work with private landowners on conservation matters of mutual interest. The project will use voluntary conservation easements on privately owned land throughout the Bear River watershed to protect wetland, grassland, and agricultural land from conversion to other uses. As a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and the Service, an easement is a perpetual conservation agreement that the Service will purchase from willing landowners.

- A conservation easement typically contains habitat protection measures that prohibit subdivision but allow for the continuation of traditional activities such as livestock grazing and haying.
- Alteration of the natural topography and conversion of native grassland, shrubland, or wetland to cropland will be prohibited on a conservation easement.

- Conservation easement land will remain in private ownership, and property tax and land management, including invasive weed control, will remain the responsibility of the landowner.
- Public access to a conservation easement will remain under the control of the landowner.

The Service will purchase conservation easements with money generated by the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965. These funds are derived from oil and gas leases on the Outer Continental Shelf, motorboat fuel tax revenues, and sale of surplus federal property. The U.S. Congress appropriates money for a specific project, such as the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area. Easement prices offered to willing sellers will be determined by an appraisal completed by an appraiser familiar with the local market.

Service staff at the three wildlife refuges in the Bear River watershed will administer and monitor the conservation easement program.

Resources Will Benefit

Through the goal of acquiring conservation easements from willing sellers, the project will help maintain habitat important to a variety of fish, mammals, and migratory birds throughout the Bear River watershed. This includes the major migration corridors that connect the northern and southern Rocky Mountains. Watershed-wide conservation efforts will be coordinated, and valuable farmland and ranchland will be protected.

The small, pristine mountain streams in the forested headwaters of the Bear River are ideal breeding habitat for Bonneville cutthroat trout and leatherside chub, which are important native species. Elk, black bear, pika, and marmots use these high-elevation forests and snow-covered mountain slopes.

The primary routes of migratory birds following the central and Pacific flyways converge in the Bear River watershed. The national wildlife refuges and adjacent areas provide essential habitat for many species of waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, and upland birds that migrate through on their way to and from the Canadian and Alaskan interior and coastal wetlands.

More than 200 bird species have been documented in the project area, and half are closely associated with wetlands. Marshbirds and shorebirds include white-faced ibis, black tern, American avocet, long-billed curlew, American bittern, sandhill crane, and trumpeter swan. Upland birds include the greater sage-grouse and Columbian sharp-tailed grouse.

In addition to the importance of the conservation area to bird species, many mammals are dependent on the blocks of intact habitat and the key migration linkages between these areas. Elk, mule deer, moose, pronghorn, bear, lynx, and wolverine depend on key wintering areas and migration corridors throughout the Bear River watershed.

Abbreviations

BRWCA	Bear River Watershed Conservation Area
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
EA	environmental assessment
GCN	(species of) greatest conservation need
HAPET	Habitat and Population Evaluation Team
LCC	land conservation cooperative
LPP	land protection plan
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
NWR	national wildlife refuge
Refuge System	National Wildlife Refuge System
refuges	national wildlife refuges within the Bear River Watershed Conservation Area
Service	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S.C.	United States Code
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
WPA	waterfowl production area

A glossary of these and other terms follows chapter 4.

