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October 2011 Workshops Summary

On October 12, 13, and 18, 2011, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) hosted meetings in Sherwood, Salem, and Eugene to discuss how we, the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), in collaboration with interested parties, can identify and address mutual conservation objectives in the Willamette Valley of Oregon.

The meetings began with a brief presentation, explaining that the study will focus on:

- Conserving rare and declining habitats such as wet prairie, upland prairie-oak savanna, oak woodland, and riparian areas;
- Assisting in recovering endangered, threatened, and candidate species.
- Connecting people to nature through outdoor recreation and education opportunities;
- Enhancing habitat connectivity and corridors in anticipation of the effects of a changing climate;
- Conserving rural working farms, ranches, and forests with wildlife habitat values through partnerships and incentives; and
- Assisting in achieving Pacific Flyway migratory bird objectives while reducing goose impacts to agricultural producers.

Most of the time at each meeting was dedicated to an open discussion centered on a series of questions:

- What emerging issues do you see related to conservation of species and habitats in the Willamette Valley and how might they be addressed?
- Where are the gaps for species/habitat protection? Are there areas of particular importance to focus our efforts?
- How can we work with you, your organization, and private landowners in achieving common objectives, such as habitat conservation, habitat connectivity, and sustainable farms, ranches, and forests?
- What kind of land protection programs (conservation easements, fee title land acquisitions, cooperative management agreements) should the Service pursue and where would these tools be most appropriate?
- What criteria should be used to help determine priorities or geographic areas where efforts should be focused?

The discussions generated numerous comments which can be grouped by six main themes:

1) Willamette Valley conservation issues and planning approach;
2) Connecting people to nature;
3) Economics;
4) Partnerships;
5) The Service's land conservation toolbox; and
6) The Service's role in conservation actions in the valley.

Willamette Valley Conservation Issues and Planning Approach

Build upon existing conservation infrastructure
Several commenters discussed the need to build upon existing plans and protected areas within the valley. Oregon Department of Wildlife's Oregon Conservation Strategy was cited as a plan to follow and to concentrate conservation actions to areas identified by the synthesis map of Conservation Opportunity Areas in the Willamette Valley. Several commenters mentioned the need for a plan that prioritizes areas of focus and cautioned against an opportunistic, scatter-shot approach to land conservation.

Climate Change and Habitat Connectivity
Climate change was raised by several commenters as a conservation issue the plan should consider. Lack of connectivity between protected areas was identified as a problem, especially in light of potential species range shifts related to a changing climate. The need for corridors leading into and out of the valley was also discussed.

Habitats and Geographic Focal Areas
Several attendees noted the lack of areas reserved for conservation east of I-5. Two areas in particular were discussed: east of Salem and the Brownsville to Coburg area. Several commenters suggested the main-stem Willamette and its associated floodplain and other riparian areas should be a focal habitat. Others suggested that we build out from existing protected areas and connect them.

Conservation Planning
Most attendees who commented suggested that the Service prioritize protecting habitats rather than planning to meet the needs of a suite of species, but there was general acknowledgement that you need to plan around both. A few commenters suggested that if species are the focus, then it should be a broad suite of species not just focusing on threatened and endangered species, but include state listed and sensitive species and Natural Heritage listed species. Since one outcome of the plan could be revised boundaries within which the Service can acquire an interest in land, some commenters suggested the boundary be drawn to cover as much of the valley as possible and then identify priority areas within the broad boundary.

Connecting People to Nature

Lack of Outdoor Recreation Sites and Access

The lack of outdoor recreation and environmental education opportunities was cited by several commenters. There was recognition that the need of urbanites to recreate in rural areas can cause conflicts. Many attendees commented on the difficulty of allowing access on private lands protected by a conservation easement. These commenters noted that access could be granted if the land was purchased by the Service. It was suggested that these lands might be able to provide Native Americans access to lands once used for traditional uses. One commenter suggested adding single-track mountain biking to the list of recreational activities that could take place in certain areas of wildlife refuges.

Reduced Budgets for Environmental Education

Reduced budgets affecting outdoor environmental education programs were cited by several commenters. It was noted that this situation was particularly affecting low-income populations.

Economics

Working Lands Initiative

The Salem meeting included several private landowners. Several commented on the need to keep working forests, farms, and ranches with wildlife habitat values as working lands. Economic issues can lead to the loss of these working lands. The need to increase the value of products coming off these lands through an economic development program was raised as a way to preserve these working lands. Conversion to other forms of agriculture with limited wildlife values was cited as an issue by several commenters. Another commenter suggested that there are partner agencies and NGOs already engaged in the working lands niche and that the NWRS shouldn't try to be everything to everyone.

Goose Depredation of Private Farmlands

Wintering geese grazing on private farmlands, primarily grass seed farm, was recognized as an important issue facing the valley. The need to engage the farming community was raised by several commenters. Incorporating the issue into initiatives such as Salmon Safe and the Food Alliance was suggested.

Leveraging Limited Dollars

Many commenters noted that the current budgetary climate will require the Service to be creative in order to get the most out of every dollar spent.

Partnerships

ODFW/ BPA Wildlife Mitigation Agreement

Many commenters suggested the Service coordinate with ODFW in light of the recent agreement with BPA to fund land protection within the valley.

Working Together
Several commenters suggested looking beyond federal partners to include watershed councils, the Farm Bureau, agricultural co-ops, counties and municipalities, local land trusts, and other NGOs. To assist with keeping working farms and woodlots working, several commenters suggested working with the Small Woodlands Association, the Oregon Wine Board, and other economic development groups. Others noted local initiatives such as Eugene's Ridges to Rivers and the Portland metropolitan area's Intertwine as groups that have good knowledge of conservation opportunities within the areas they encompass.

The Service's Land Conservation Toolbox

Fee Title v. Conservation Easements
Several commenters cautioned the Service on relying too much on conservation easements, noting difficulties in monitoring compliance and issues when the property changes hands. Several commenters suggested that fee title was the way to go when trying to protect threatened and endangered species. Others, on the other hand, suggested that perpetual easements may be a good tool to keep working lands in production.

Other Tools
Several commenters mentioned the need for the Service to include all of the land protection tools in the plan. Cooperative management agreements were cited as a good way to assist others meet their long-term land management goals.

The Service's Role

Funding
Several commenters inquired about this program's ability to increase funding for the Service's Partners Program or to fund other agencies, land trusts, and NGOs currently engaged in Willamette Valley conservation issues.

Sharing Equipment / Technical Assistance
Many commenters suggested that sharing refuge equipment and providing technical assistance on lands outside the refuge system would be very helpful to them as they implement their conservation management strategies. Maintaining easements held by others through long-term cooperative management agreements was suggested as a potential role for the Service in the valley.

Priorities
When asked what the NWRS should prioritize in developing the plan, several commenters suggested that the NWRS stick to its primary mission of long-term habitat protection and recovery of listed species and species in decline and allow other partners to continue doing what they do best.