

Willamette Valley Conservation Study

Conserving America's Great Outdoors

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is initiating a collaborative study of land and water conservation opportunities within the Willamette Valley. The Willamette Valley Conservation Study (Study) is part of the America's Great Outdoors Initiative, which takes as its premise that lasting conservation solutions should rise from the American people—and that the protection of our natural heritage is an objective shared by all Americans (<http://americagreatoutdoors.gov/>).

The Service will create a forum where local communities, landowners, agencies, and organizations can collaborate on potential land conservation strategies that support local economies, conserve natural resources, and provide increased outdoor recreation and education opportunities.

The study will highlight the importance of protecting and fostering traditional farming and ranching, land practices, and economies within the Willamette Valley. This

landscape-level planning effort, in collaboration with our partners and other stakeholders, will focus on:

- Conserving rare and declining habitats such as wet prairie, upland prairie-oak savanna, oak woodland, riverine, wetland, and riparian areas;
- Assisting in recovering endangered, threatened, and candidate species;
- Supporting the sustainability of working farms, ranches, and forests;
- Connecting people to nature through outdoor recreation and education opportunities; and
- Assisting in achieving Pacific Flyway migratory bird objectives while reducing Canada goose impacts to agricultural producers.

One possible outcome of the efforts noted above could be development of a voluntary conservation easement program and/or possibly expansion of existing national wildlife refuges or establishment of new ones.

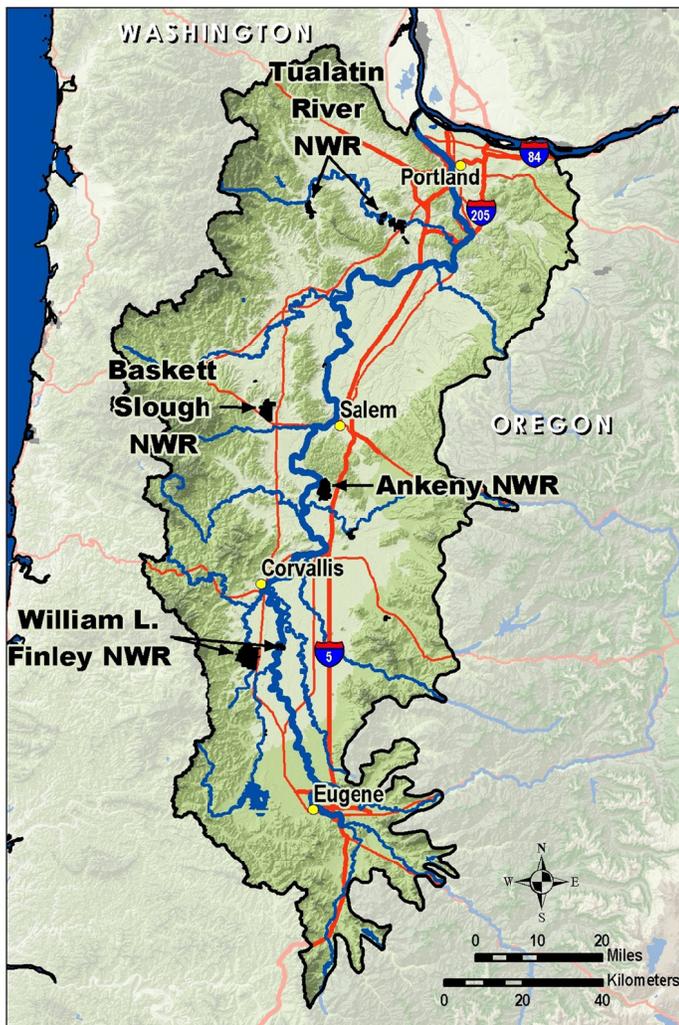


Protecting and restoring rare habitats such as wet prairies are one of the key issues for the Study. Photo by USFWS

Why the Willamette Valley?

The Willamette Valley is home to nearly 70% of Oregon's citizens (approximately 2.7 million people) and many projections anticipate this population could double by 2050. Approximately 95% of the Willamette Valley is in private ownership with only 1% of the remaining 5% dedicated primarily to conservation. While some fish and wildlife populations such as Canada geese have increased over the past five decades (which has created another management challenge), most species have experienced significant declines. Additional wildlife-related recreation opportunities, including hunting, fishing, and bird watching, will need to be developed as the human population and demands for these types of outdoor uses increase.

Willamette Valley Conservation Study Area



"Where and what conservation tools are the most strategic for the Willamette Valley?"

The Willamette Valley is both regionally and nationally unique in its combination of rich soils, size, low elevation, and moderate, maritime-influenced climate. Historically, it supported a tremendous diversity of native habitats,

including dynamic river and floodplain systems, wet prairie grasslands, upland prairie-oak savanna, and oak woodlands. While reduced in size and distribution, these unique habitats still support a diverse assemblage of native fish, wildlife, and plant species, including several endangered, threatened, and candidate species.

The Willamette Valley's future ability to protect wildlife is uncertain. Natural resource issues are many, including habitat loss and fragmentation, land use changes, urban expansion, invasive species, a changing climate, reduced water quantity and quality, and the limitation of natural processes such as fire and flooding that historically shaped and maintained native habitats.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY



Cackling Canada Geese have increased along with management challenges. This is one of the key issues for the Study.
Photo by Joe Staff

• **Helping Farms and Geese** – In the mid-1960s, when three of the existing national wildlife refuges within the Willamette Valley were established, there were approximately 15,000 to 25,000 Canada geese wintering in the Willamette Valley/Lower Columbia River region, with the majority of these being dusky Canada geese. Presently, there are approximately 150,000 to 250,000 wintering geese in this area, primarily cackling geese. Private lands, especially grass seed, wheat, and pasture crops, are playing a major role in providing food for wintering geese. However, the provision of these crops comes at a cost to the farming community due to crop damage or depredation. The Service proposes to meet these challenges by providing various types of incentives to landowners to continue to provide forage crops for Canada geese.

• **Protecting Unique and Rare Habitats** – The Service will build upon recent conservation planning efforts and work with others to help protect the remnant prairies, oak savannas and woodlands, riparian corridors, and other unique natural areas within the Willamette Valley. The

Service is proposing to work with all individuals, groups, and agencies interested in helping protect these rare and special places.



Conserving several different unique and rare habitat types including Oak Savanna would be a focus area of the Study. Photo by TNC

- **Wildlife-Dependent Recreation** – Refuges in the valley provide quality outdoor recreation and education experiences to about 500,000 visitors a year. Demand for such activities is anticipated to increase as the valley's population grows. Identifying areas which provide outdoor experiences is a key component of the Study.

Based on an analysis of compatibility with wildlife management objectives, areas acquired in fee title by the Service could be opened to wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, interpretation, and environmental education, for people to connect with nature.

PROPOSED PROCESS FOR THE STUDY

Using public input, the Service will develop a Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment to evaluate the proposal to conserve additional lands within the study area. The Service plans on using a collaborative approach that would involve representatives from other governmental and non-governmental organizations, local communities, private industry and landowners to develop the Conservation Plan and its Environmental Assessment. Upon completion of the draft plan and assessment, further comments and input will be sought.

If approved, the final plan could authorize the Service to expand the National Wildlife Refuge System within the study area by acquiring an interest in identified properties using conservation easements or possibly fee title acquisition.

POSSIBLE CONSERVATION METHODS

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between landowners and government agencies or qualified conservation organizations. We are particularly interested in a developing a new easement program that preserves traditional working farms, ranches, and forests and the wildlife values they support. In addition, the Service is interested in developing incentives for farmers who are providing forage crops for wintering Canada geese. We want to hear from you on how such a program could be structured.

Under a conservation easement, only specific property rights are transferred to the Service. All other property rights remain with the landowners. In addition, participating properties would remain on local tax rolls.

Additional land conservation tools that may be developed include cooperative land management agreements, land transfer, and/or donation.

Fee title acquisition could be used in some areas, for the possible expansion of the existing national wildlife refuges within the study area. Fee title and easement values would be determined by using a fair market appraisal process. Following Service policy, lands would only be acquired from willing sellers.



Increasing wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities including bird watching would be one of the key issues for the Study. Photo by George Gentry

We Want to Hear From You.

We will hold a series of listening sessions (public meetings) in local communities throughout the Willamette Valley. These sessions will provide a forum for local landowners, citizens, communities, non-

governmental organizations, and governmental agencies to provide direction for future actions by the Service through its National Wildlife Refuge System. The dates, times, and locations for these meetings will be announced soon.

How do I get involved?

The Service welcomes your questions and comments! Whether you are an interested individual or a group representative, please do not hesitate to call, write, or visit our website at FW1_WVCS@fws.gov. Add your name to our mailing list and leave us your perspectives on the future of the Willamette Valley Conservation Study Area project.



Conserving habitat for the Fenders blue butterfly, one of 12 federally listed species, would be addressed as part of the Study.
Photo by Carolyn Menke

For more information, contact:

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Oak Savanna – Photo by USFWS



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The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.