

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
WWRP Critical Habitat Category 12-1132
Expanded Project Description

Heart of the Cascades 2012

WDFW's Heart of the Cascades project seeks to protect 5,496 acres that contains an extraordinary range of habitat diversity: 35 miles of streams and riparian areas, mid-elevation mixed-conifer transitioning to mature ponderosa pine, aspen groves, shrub-steppe, and talus slopes. The site is located approximately 16 miles west of Ellensburg. It abuts the LT Murray Wildlife Area to the east and connects to U.S. Forest Service lands to the west. The objective of the project is to achieve landscape-scale conservation by eliminating the threat posed by private checkerboard ownership and allow for coordinated land management across this biologically rich and high priority area for conservation. The Heart of the Cascades Phase I and Phase II acquisitions totaling 10,386 acres have been completed using prior grants from WWRP and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Section 6 funding. WDFW is partnering with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation on the project and is in negotiations with Plum Creek Timber, who has expressed support for this project.



1. Ecological and Biological Characteristics

The bigger picture. The Heart of the Cascades effort seeks to secure protection of the critical remaining public-private checkerboard ownerships in the central Cascade Range. In the past decade, there have been impressive and unprecedented efforts in central Washington to block up ownership and improve land management and ecosystem function directly adjacent to the site. Successful protection of lands in this checkerboard ownership will address a critical remaining gap and achieve landscape-scale conservation in a strategically important transitional zone of the East Cascades. The project is supported by many regional science-based plans including: The East Cascades Ecoregional Assessment, the Yakima Sub-basin plan, the Central Cascades Habitat Conservation Plan, the Spotted Owl Recovery Plan, the Tapash Collaborative and the Yakima Salmon Recovery Plan.

Uniqueness and significance of the site. Habitats in this transitional zone of the east Cascades are rich in plant and animal species diversity. The project lies along both an elevation gradient (4000-5800 ft.) and a precipitation gradient from east to west, resulting in a mosaic of habitat types. The project encompasses approximately nine sections that are currently undeveloped, ecologically important, and connected to surrounding protected public lands. Emerging science suggests that the elevation gradient and landscape integrity of the site will allow species to move upward in altitude and along temperature gradients in response to climate change.

Fish and Wildlife Species or Communities. The project will benefit a diverse array of terrestrial and aquatic fish and wildlife species, including federally and state listed species or species of concern. Located between two Northwest Forest Plan owl reserves, the project provides critical foraging, nesting and dispersal connectivity for the Northern Spotted Owl. Northern goshawks also nest on the project. Mule deer and elk migrate and calve on the property. The streams and wetlands support an abundance of amphibians such as tailed frogs, western toads and long-toed salamanders. Protecting the headwaters of Taneum and Manastash Creek benefits both amphibians and fish. Steelhead, rainbow trout, and West slope cutthroat rear on the site. Taneum Creek is considered critical habitat in the recovery zone for bull trout. Fisheries surveys performed in the late 1990s determined that population densities of salmonids in Taneum Creek were among the highest of the 10 Upper Yakima tributaries.

Quality of Habitat. An interesting feature of this project is the topographic complexity which in turn creates a myriad of habitats that result in high biological diversity. The level of species diversity and populations on the site is a strong indicator of habitat quality. The project contains a diversity of forest age classes that reflect historic conditions. The mosaic of forests on the project, intermingled with riparian systems, talus and shrub-steppe habitats create a biologically diverse area. The project area provides an important corridor for elk and mule deer to move between winter and summer habitats. Development hasn't yet fragmented this habitat, and key ecological processes still function to sustain the broad array of life forms.

2. Species & Communities with Special Status



Threat to species/communities. Habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation are the key threats to target species. Rural residential development, construction of new roads, insects & disease, catastrophic fire, and disturbance from unmanaged recreation all contribute to these habitat losses. The project reduces these threats by permanently protecting WDFW priority habitats that are critical for the long-term viability of target species.

Ecological roles. The site includes the headwaters of two watersheds, encompassing more than 34 miles of streams. These streams provide critical rearing and spawning habitat for federally listed steelhead, as well as other native resident fish, and an abundance of amphibians. Protecting the headwater streams has the dual benefit of protecting these species, while also protecting the Yakima River by delivering cool, clean water to the mainstem. The Yakima Basin Salmon Recovery Plan identifies protecting headwater streams as a key strategy for salmon recovery.

3. Manageability and Viability

Immediacy of threat to the site. Plum Creek Timber has placed all of their forestlands in this region up for sale. The close proximity of this site to the cities of Cle Elum and Ellensburg increases the risk of residential development on the project site. Residential development in dry forest habitat impedes the ability of managers to implement landscape scale treatments, such as prescribed burning.

Long-term viability. The new acquisition would become part of WDFW's LT Murray Wildlife Area. In 2006 WDFW successfully purchased the Tieton Township from Plum Creek Timber Company. In 2011 WDFW successfully purchased the Rock Creek/Bald Mountain Township. In both of these places, WDFW has collaborated on landscape management of roads, recreation, habitat and fire through the Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative. The Tapash Collaborative includes WDFW, the US Forest Service, DNR, Yakama Nation, and The Nature Conservancy and provides a mechanism to coordinate management in this new site as well. Management on neighboring USFS lands is guided by the Okanogan -Wenatchee Forest Restoration Strategy and compliments WDFW management and federal spotted owl recovery plans.

Enhancement of existing protected land. The project site connects to the L.T. Murray Wildlife Area on the east and is surrounded by Forest Service land. DNR recently acquired 125 square miles of checkerboard private ownership in Kittitas County. Successful protection of this checkerboard will shelter adjacent public lands from private encroachment, effectively doubling the acres of wildlife habitat protection.

Ongoing Stewardship. WDFW and the USFS will collaborate on stewardship through the Tapash Sustainable Forest Collaborative (Tapash). Tapash partners have recently received a \$10 million 10-year grant to support landscape scale forest restoration treatments in the project area through the new federal Forest Landscape Restoration Act. To date, the Tapash Collaborative has received more than \$3 million to implement forest restoration in this landscape. WDFW is pursuing additional stewardship funds through the WWRP State Lands Restoration category and other relevant RCO grant programs.

4. Public Benefit

Project support. The project enjoys support from a variety of local, state, tribal, and federal entities including the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, Kittitas County Commissioners, and the Yakama Nation. These sections are also identified for acquisition in the Yakima River Basin Water Enhancement Project (YRBWEP) integrated plan that has received broad support.

Educational, recreation, and scientific value. The Manastash-Taneum area is an extremely popular area for recreation, including hiking, bird watching, hunting, and fishing. Because of its many recreational opportunities, this area is also a part of a proposed National Recreation Area in the YRBWEP integrated plan. Public access will be maintained and enhanced through this project.

