
Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group

2009 Progress Report



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BACKGROUND

In 2007, the Washington State Legislature created the Habitat and Recreation Lands Coordinating Group¹ to improve communication between natural resources agencies about land acquisitions and disposals, and to make that information transparent and accessible. The Lands Coordinating Group is comprised of representatives from the Recreation and Conservation Office, State Parks and Recreation Commission, Department of Natural Resources, Department of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Transportation, Conservation Commission, and Department of Ecology. Representatives from non-profit organizations, local governments, private interests, and others also participate in the lands group.

There were several things happening at the time that led to the lands group's formation. Foremost, was a concern raised by several counties that a disproportionate amount of land in their counties was publicly owned. For example, in 1999, about 57 percent of land in Okanogan County was publicly owned.² Citizens and local government officials there wanted to know what land the state was planning to acquire because of concerns that their local tax revenues would decline when private lands became publicly owned. Also, a report³ was released in 2005 that examined acquisition and disposal practices of several natural resources agencies and concluded that coordination would be improved with better communication and transparency between agencies themselves, as well as between agencies and their constituents.

In 2008, the lands group developed an action plan⁴ and formed six subgroups to accomplish the 13 legislative mandates such as developing and convening an annual forum for agencies to coordinate their near-term acquisition and disposal plans; producing an interagency, statewide biennial forecast of habitat and recreation land acquisitions and disposal plans; and developing a recommended method for interagency GIS-based documentation of habitat and recreation lands in cooperation with other state agency GIS. The action plan sets forth objectives, outcomes, timelines, and assignments for accomplishing the mandates. The action plan is updated annually and is used to track the group's progress. A 2009 update⁵ shows the progress made on each statutory task.

This memorandum is submitted on behalf of the lands group to satisfy the reporting requirement in subsection (2) of the Revised Code of Washington 75A.25.260⁶.

Lands group members⁷, including representatives of state and local governments, private landowners, and conservation organizations, worked to implement the action plan. The Washington State Recreation

¹ Substitute Senate Bill 5236.

² 1999 Public and Tribal Lands Inventory, Recreation and Conservation Office, <http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/plip/FinalReport.pdf>

³ Toward a Coordination Strategy for Habitat and Recreation Land Acquisitions in Washington State; Final Report, 2005, Recreation and Conservation Office, <http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/hrlcg/LandsFinal.pdf>

⁴ Attachment A: http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/hrlcg/AttachmentA_Action_Plan.pdf

⁵ Attachment B: http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/hrlcg/AttachmentB_Progress_Report.pdf

⁶ Attachment C: http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/hrlcg/AttachmentC_Legislation.pdf

and Conservation Office (RCO) provides staff support and hosts the lands group's Web site. The lands group holds quarterly meetings to discuss issues, to consider subgroup proposals, and to provide direction.

2009 HIGHLIGHTS

ANNUAL ACQUISITION COORDINATING FORUM

The lands group hosted a State Lands Acquisition Coordinating Forum on July 16, 2009. The forum gave state agencies a platform to coordinate habitat and recreation land acquisitions and disposals for the 2009-2011 biennium. Under a plan developed by the lands group, agencies will meet in odd-numbered years to coordinate funded acquisition and disposal projects. They will meet in even-numbered years to coordinate acquisition grant requests.

Agencies participating in the 2009 forum were:

- Department of Natural Resources
- Department of Fish and Wildlife
- Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission
- State Conservation Commission
- Department of Ecology
- Department of Transportation

The agencies shared information about the habitat and recreation lands that they want to acquire and dispose, including the agency objectives being met by the acquisition. Most agencies presented maps of their potential acquisitions and how they fit with other land ownership in the area. Forum participants used the maps to help identify areas for coordination with other agencies and partnerships with local governments, tribes, and non-profit organizations. For example, State Parks and Recreation Commission planners talked with the Department of Natural Resources real estate management staff about potentially transferring some park parcels in several counties, including the Washougal Oaks Natural Area in Clark County, to the Department of Natural Resources' Natural Areas Program.

Several agencies talked with the Department of Transportation about using existing state-owned property to facilitate the department's wetland mitigation requirements. In addition, three agencies discussed developing alternate methods of completing "state-to-state" property transfers.

Dan Budd, a real estate manager with the Department of Fish and Wildlife, said "We really look forward to more opportunities for working with the Department of Natural Resources and the State Parks and Recreation Commission. The annual forum is a good way for us to interact and possibly reduce duplicating our work. At the forum we might find out we don't need to ask for funding for an area that another agency is planning to protect."

⁷ Attachment D: http://www.rco.wa.gov/documents/hrlcg/AttachmentD_Members.pdf

After the forum, the lands group facilitated discussions between agencies about the identified sites.

The lands group will host the next annual forum in February 2010 to help agencies coordinate acquisition grant requests for the 2011-2013 biennium. This forum will be held before applications are due for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, a large grant program for acquiring recreation and conservation lands, to give agency planners and scientists, as well as local, non-profit, and tribal organizations a chance to participate.

Sample Project Presentation at the Annual Forum

Project: Department of Fish and Wildlife’s proposed purchase of the Black River Ranch in the Cedar River watershed.

This is part of a larger partnership project to protect prairies and wetlands in the Black River riparian corridor south of Olympia.

It is utilized by elk, deer, bear, beaver and several other terrestrial species, listed salmonids and the Oregon spotted frog.

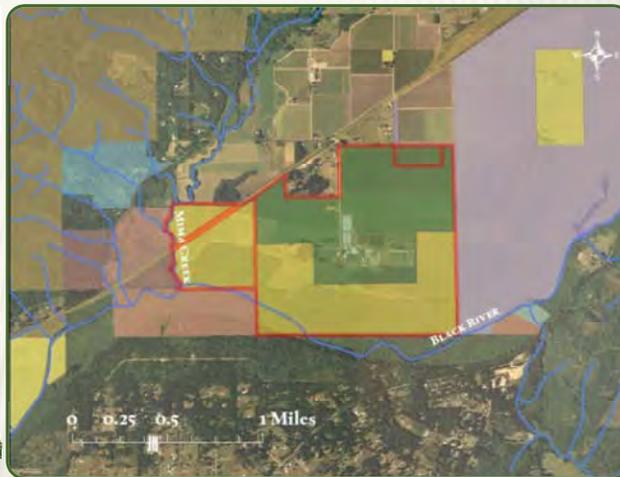
Type of Acquisition	
Fund Source	
Estimated Cost	



Black River Ranch

Black River Ranch

County	Thurston
Acres	



BIENNIAL ACQUISITION FORECAST

At the July 2009 forum, the lands group presented a prototype of a map displaying potential state habitat and recreation land acquisitions and disposals for the 2009-2011 biennium. The lands group will produce a similar map and companion report in June 2010 displaying state acquisitions and disposals planned for the 2011-2013 biennium. A biennial acquisition and disposal forecast will be produced and published in June of even years; the purpose of this “sunshine” forecast is to make acquisition information more transparent and accessible.

The statewide forecast map also will show potential acquisition and disposal sites by their planned functional use (conservation, recreation, or combined use). The companion report will be organized by county and will include detailed information about the potential projects, including:

- The agency that will be acquiring or disposing of the land
- The project name
- The project’s number of acres
- The project’s legislative district
- The estimated project cost
- The project’s fund source
- The planned purpose of the acquisition (possibly in terms of these land function classifications: conservation, recreation, or combined use. Definitions for these classes are being vetted among agency representatives.)
- Whether the acquisition is in fee or less-than fee
- Whether the acquisition is a transfer between agencies
- Detail about the project including its unique features, specific habitat that will be provided, project partners, whether there are existing farmlands on or near the site

The lands group will test the prototype map and report with participants at the annual forum in February 2010. The forum is a public meeting and stakeholders are invited to attend. The public will have time during the forum to make comments and ask questions. After agency presentations, a break out session will allow stakeholders to meet with individual agency representatives. The lands group will use contact forms to help link members of the public with specific agency contacts. The map and report will be available on the internet at the lands group’s Web site⁸ in June 2010.

ACQUISITIONS PLANNING WORK SESSION

On April 29, 2009, the lands group hosted a work session to collaborate on statewide recreation and conservation planning strategies. Participants included the Department of Transportation, the State Conservation Commission, the Department of Commerce, the Puget Sound Partnership, the Recreation and Conservation Office, the Biodiversity Council, the U.S. Forest Service, and non-profits such as The Nature Conservancy, Defenders of Wildlife, Columbia Land Trust, and the Trust for Public Lands.

⁸ The lands group’s Web site can be found at: <http://www.rco.wa.gov/boards/hrlcg.shtml>.

Presenters explained their acquisition planning strategies and discussed available tools for coordinating land acquisitions. Participants gave the lands group specific recommendations for coordinating state land acquisitions and making acquisition plans more transparent.

CHALLENGES

In 2009, the final budget eliminated funding for agencies to participate in the group. Specific 2007-2009 funding that was provided to the agencies to participate was eliminated in the subsequent budget. Members from state agencies, local governments, and private organizations have had their budgets cut as well, making it difficult to provide staff to attend lands group meetings. In addition, the group is challenged to implement the legislative mandates within existing resources.

To overcome these obstacles, the lands group is developing recommendations to the Legislature to submit in 2012 based on different funding levels. For example, the lands group can recommend a range of options for standardizing and centralizing acquisition data, including what can be done with little or no resources up to what can be done with more substantial resources for systems and staffing. These recommendations might range from producing a simple spreadsheet of agency acquisition data to building a centralized data system that publishes information on the Internet.

Several of the 13 tasks assigned by the legislature, however, require the lands group to produce more than recommendations. For example, the lands group is required to produce a biennial acquisition forecast, convene an annual forum to coordinate state agency acquisitions and disposal plans, and develop an inventory of potential public lands that could be transferred into habitat and recreation land management status. The lands group will carry out these tasks the best that it can without current funding.

NEXT STEPS

On February 3-4, 2010, the lands group will host the next annual forum to coordinate agency acquisition grant requests.

In June 2010, the lands group will publish the first biennial forecast report and companion map for the 2011-2013 biennium.

Other lands group goals for 2010 include:

- Hosting a workshop to develop recommendations for a centralized system for coordinating agency Geographic Information System-based documentation of habitat and recreation lands, and for standardizing acquisition and disposal recordkeeping.
- Identifying specific criteria and processes for monitoring the success of acquisitions.
- Developing “straw dog” recommendations for revising Washington Administrative Codes and policies related to acquisition planning requirements.

- Determining federal acquisition grant cycle timelines and procedures to coordinate applications for federally funded acquisitions.
- Identifying key state and federal partners to help develop an inventory of potential public lands for transfer into habitat and recreation land management status.

The lands group will complete legislative assignments no later than July 31, 2012, at which time this group will sunset. The lands group will continue to update and use its action plan to complete specific tasks. The lands group's work will culminate in a final report and recommendations delivered to the Legislature no later than July 2012.

The Recreation and Conservation Office will submit a third annual report to the Office of Financial Management in 2010. In the meantime, the lands group progress, meeting and event information, and documents can be found at its Web site.⁹

⁹ <http://www.rco.wa.gov/boards/hrlcg.shtml>