

# The Biological Case for Preserving Lands in the I-90 Corridor

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Cascades Conservation Partnership (the Partnership) is proposing to acquire parcels of private land in the Cascade Range of central Washington - from the Alpine Lakes Wilderness to Mount Rainier - in order to protect fish and wildlife habitat and improve outdoor recreation opportunities.

The primary objectives of the Partnership are:

- To maintain and improve the ecological integrity and connectivity of forest and stream habitat by reducing or eliminating habitat fragmentation;
- To preserve the remaining old-growth forests;
- To improve recreation opportunities and experiences by increasing the size and number of roadless areas and Wilderness Areas; and
- To protect and restore aquatic habitat for imperiled salmon and trout populations;

This paper provides the rationale and identifies priorities for acquiring roughly 74,000 acres of land in the Washington's Central Cascades. Our analysis considered lands from the Beckler River in the Skykomish watershed of Snohomish County down to the Fossil Creek basin of Cowlitz County. However, the majority of key parcels are located in the South Fork of the Snoqualmie River, Snoqualmie Pass, and Upper Yakima River within King and Kittitas County, an area bisected by Interstate Highway 90 where multiple land ownership patterns dominate the landscape. A combination of private funds and the federal government's Land and Water Conservation Fund will be used to secure protection for these lands.

There are three primary reasons why the Central Cascades are critical to the future of Washington's fish and wildlife:

The area presents a "bottleneck" to wildlife movement. This area is the narrowest region - east to west - of public land between Northern California and Southern British Columbia. All wildlife moving between the North Cascades and southern Washington and Oregon must pass through this slim finger of habitat.

The area is important for east-west wildlife movement due to the low elevation of the Snoqualmie and Yakima Rivers, and Snoqualmie Pass. The multiple-lane Interstate Highway, large commercial developments, and industrial forestry in this area present considerable obstacles to the movement of most fish and wildlife.

The area is positioned between a number of important wildlife refugia including: Alpine Lakes Wilderness to the north; old-growth forest reserves to the east, west and south; and Norse Peak, William O. Douglas, and Goat Rocks Wilderness Areas, and Mt. Rainier National Park to the south. Without sufficient habitat to link these conservation areas together, their function as refugia will be compromised.

For over a decade, U.S. Forest Service biologists have recognized the Central Cascades of Washington as a "critical connective link in the north-south movement of

[wildlife] in the Cascade Range." A connective link, or "connectivity," means that lands are needed to provide habitat for the dispersal and other movement of animals, fish and plants. In a recent analysis, the Forest Service determined that, under current ownership patterns, the percentage of older forest habitat in this part of the Cascades will never exceed 50 percent - a serious threat to habitat connectivity - due to logging and other development on private land. The Service concluded that protection of wildlife habitat and connectivity was best achieved through land exchanges or purchases that secure large blocks of federal land.

The future of several threatened and endangered species are also in question. Wilderness-dependent animals, like wolverine, grizzly bear and gray wolf, have very few options for dispersal as lands south of Snoqualmie Pass are heavily roaded, and contain very little solitude. Late-successional dependent species, such as the northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet, are also threatened by highly fragmented habitat.

There are four critical corridors along this portion of the central Cascades. The Cascade Crest corridor is the highest priority as it meets the needs of more threatened, endangered or species of concern than any other group. Grizzly bear, gray wolf, wolverine, lynx, marten, fisher, spotted owl, goshawk, as well as other non-listed species such as cavity dependent species would require this area for several reasons. First, this grouping contains the highest elevation parcels and would ensure connectivity of species dependent on high elevation solitude. Species dependent on this type of habitat are not dependent on mature stands as much as large areas without roads that provide solitude, and an adequate prey base dependent on suitable foraging/cover areas. Second, some old growth remains in medium-sized isolated patches that contain spotted owl, marten and goshawk territories. Third, road densities are very high on private land. Acquiring these parcels would allow many miles of road to be closed thereby allowing prey populations for large carnivores to thrive.

The Easton Ridge corridor is the second priority because some medium patches of old growth still exist and they are scheduled for immediate logging (1-3 years). This group contains the most immediate threat of loss of large blocks of late-successional (mature and old-growth) forest, and in general, this group contains the largest consolidation of late-successional forest in the I-90 checkerboard lands. This is one of the three corridors identified in the Snoqualmie Pass AMA as critical for maintaining connectivity.

Kelly Butte is the third priority because it is the only location on the west slope of the Cascades where road densities are low and habitat quality for old growth and riparian stands are fairly high. This area is a key link with the Cedar River watershed to the north and the wilderness areas and Mt Rainier National Park to the south in terms of providing north-south connectivity west of the crest. In addition, there is a high concentration of west-side old growth suitable for both spotted owls and marbled murrelet. Currently some of these parcels are critical habitat for marbled murrelet, and these parcels contain the best habitat in the Green River drainage for this species.