



Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife
Real estate Services
P.O. Box 43158
Olympia, WA 98504

February 1st, 2021

Dear WDFW Lands Staff:

Conservation Northwest is thrilled to support the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife's 2021 land acquisition priorities. In particular, three of the proposals would have strong benefits for the wildlife and habitat within some of our priority program areas.

Chehalis Wildlife Area Expansion

Conservation Northwest fully supports the extension and further acquisition of key parcels expanding the Chehalis Wildlife Area. Key habitat for semiaquatic and aquatic species will be protected, which consists of 1,504 acres of wetland, floodplain, aquatic, and riparian habitats. Importantly, the Chehalis River and its tributaries like the Satsop create a network of riparian corridors throughout the basin, connecting the basin to important upland habitats. These networks are not just utilized by species that are associated with riparian or riverine habitats, but they are also used by a suite of non-habitat associated species as well, which use them for pathways of movement throughout the landscape. This particular acquisition not only excites us because of its location within our Cascades to Olympics Program, but also for its potential to create linkages and strengthen networks of riparian corridors in the region.

Furthermore, Conservation Northwest recognizes the potential for the Satsop River and its connected network of riparian corridors to act as pathways into the Olympics. Hwy 12 crosses over the Satsop River creating a narrow bottleneck through which species must cross to move out of, or into, the basin. In fact, Conservation Northwest is trying to find ways remove invasive plant species from under the bridge, plants that may prohibit movement for some species. This acquisition will help protect parts of the Satsop River corridor and parts of the Chehalis River corridor, enhancing a riparian network that will make our work at the Satsop even more advantageous for wildlife movement in and out of the area. All of these factors make the Chehalis Wildlife Area expansion an exciting proposal for our Cascades to Olympics program, and we are supportive of an acquisition that includes engagement with nearby landowners to support the needs of the local community.

Centralia Mine Project

We strongly support this extremely exciting proposal, as it offers a suite of benefits to wildlife and the community. With restoration and better management, this area could boast high-quality wetland and grassland habitats, which could provide much needed critical habitat for threatened

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and endangered species. Furthermore, it is already home to important local populations of fish and wildlife. Interestingly, the proposed parcels have the potential to be part of a key corridor for wildlife movement. A landscape integrity corridor intersects with the proposed acquisition locations, and maps of this intersection show that if the areas were restored and properly managed they could be key building blocks for a permeable network of wildlife corridors (Figure 1). Through our Cascades to Olympics Program we have identified the area extending from just south of Grand Mound to just north of Scatter Creek as a potential “northern linkage” for wildlife to move to and from the Cascades and Olympics. The proposed acquisition sites sit within a corridor that converges with the “northern linkage”, crosses I-5 to the northwest and connects to corridors that eventually terminate in the Olympics. These linkages will not be functionally connected unless actions are taken to improve wildlife crossings on highways and to conserve and protect corridors in the area. This acquisition proposal presents an opportunity to restore and protect one such corridor, which could be a key stepping stone in a landscape-level network of wildlife corridors.

Development and land use change have degraded or erased permeable large parcel corridors, and this acquisition can help reverse and mitigate some of those losses. We hope to see this proposal approved and the land managed, at least in part, as a segment of a wildlife corridor.

We are also excited about the opportunity for increased public use and access, via the new wildlife area. Increasing public access while managing the land for long-term sustainable use will increase opportunities for the community to engage with their public lands now and for future generations. Lastly, we applaud the economic benefits that this proposal could offer the local communities.

Chester Butte

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WDFW Centralia Mine Project Proposed Acquisition: Landscape Integrity Least-Cost Corridors

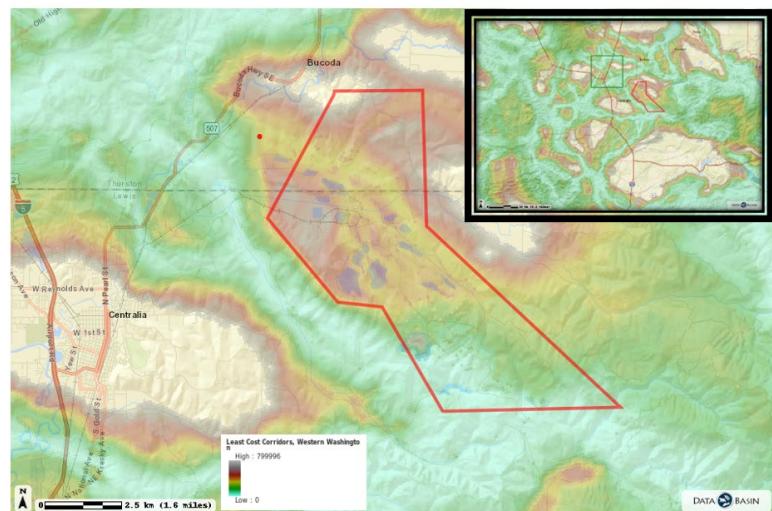


Figure 1. Red polygon represents a rough estimate of the mine acquisition location (not exact). Green Box in zoomed out view represents Conservation Northwest's hypothesized “northern linkage”. Map shows landscape integrity “naturalness” Least-Cost Corridors, which are shown ranging from least-cost of movement (Electric Blue), to extremely high cost to movement (Dark Gray), and to the extreme of impermeable landscape (areas absent of a corridor). WDFW’s mine acquisition location could be restored and managed to increase the neighboring corridor or create a corridor of its own. Note: model represents landscape integrity, which illustrates corridors of “natural” landscape not specific habitat for any given species, but may be used as a proxy for generalists. Map accessed From Data Basin Jan. 2021. Gallo, J.A., E.C. Butts, T.A. Miewald, K.A. Foster. 2019. Comparing and Combining Omniscape and Linkage Mapper Connectivity Analyses in Western Washington. Published by: Conservation Biology Institute. Corvallis, OR, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.8120924>

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The Chester Butte proposed acquisition, although recently burned, has historically been considered excellent existing and potential habitat for the endangered pygmy rabbit, the endangered sharp-tailed grouse, Washington ground squirrel, and ever dwindling numbers of sage grouse in Douglas County and our state. Grasses are expected to return to this property naturally in the next year or two or with some limited restoration activities. Sagebrush so necessary for pygmy rabbits and sage grouse will take longer to recover but once grasses return, it should provide excellent sharp-tailed grouse habitat and potential LEK locations. Prior to burning, at least one known sage grouse LEK existed on this property. In addition, once grasses return it will have benefits to other shrub-steppe species such as mule deer and numerous song birds. Therefore, Conservation Northwest highly supports the proposal to acquire this property from a willing landowner for the protection and beneficial use by wildlife.

We would like to thank WDFW for the opportunity to comment on these important property acquisition proposals.

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