

‘Heart of Cascades’ Project Threatened

By Scott Sandsberry
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YAKIMA, Wash. — “The Heart of the Cascades” is a high-country explorer’s paradise, 36 square miles of rugged cliffs, ponderosa pines, snowmelt-fed streams and subalpine meadows.

Mountain goats gather on a ridgeline near Devils Slide, an area on the south side of Manastash Ridge considered so critical as wildlife habitat that a coalition of private nonprofit and public agencies are working to bring it permanently into public-lands ownership. But the state’s financial woes have those agencies anxiously awaiting the outcome of the Legislature’s special session. (Photo courtesy of JOHN MARSHALL)

It is home to elk in summer and muledeer in winter, to bighorn sheep and mountain goats, to golden eagles and at least one peregrine falcon.

And it is up in the air.

Rising to 6,000 feet elevation at Bald Mountain, it is that quite literally. Figuratively, its future is just as much in the air, subject to the political and financial machinations of the state budget process.

From the vantage point of those who seek to protect it from the sprawl of human development, the “Heart of the Cascades” is very much at risk.

At stake is the completion of an \$8 million, three-year, multi-phase sale of 16 one-mile squares within this 6-by-6-mile block of checkerboarded private and federal ownership north and east of State Route 410, an area including such locally familiar destinations as Rock Creek, Bald Mountain, Canteen Flats, Cattle Camp Spring and Gold Creek.

The sale of those 16 sections from Plum Creek Timber Co. to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife would put the entire block in public hands, split between the Forest Service and the WDFW.

That would guarantee coordinated fire management policy while ensuring no portions of that 36-square mile area would ever be sold off, subdivided and developed.

But the completion of the sale is contingent upon money from the state capital budget, and upon the budgetary haggling that will renew this morning when Washington's legislators head into special session.

The House's proposed budget included the money to complete the transaction. So did the Senate's, but just barely.

The governor's budget proposal did not — and, as originally written, would mothball the state grant program essentially not only to the “Heart of the Cascades” but countless other high-priority projects.

Declared Joanna Grist, executive director of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition (WWRC), “It's the greatest threat to the program we've ever faced.”

Navigating the labyrinth of any governmental budget process requires a political road map and a boatload of acronyms.

But when it comes to state and local parks, public-land recreation and the preservation of working farms and wildlife habitat, at the heart of this political and financial football is the Washington Wildlife Recreation Program (WWRP).

The program was formed in 1989 by a bipartisan coalition in response to the state's dwindling support of habitat land and parks funding. Since then, it has secured more than \$620 million in state funding for projects like “Heart of the Cascades” — with \$444 million in county, federal and local matching funds bumping that up over \$1 billion.

In the current biennium, the WWRP received \$70 million to parcel out through its carefully prioritized process by the state Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO); in the previous biennium, it received \$100 million, the same amount it requested from the state's capital budget for 2011-13.

Even those in the WWRC, the bipartisan coalition that created the WWRP 22 years ago and is co-chaired by former governors Mike Lowry (a Democrat) and Dan Evans (a Republican), knew getting anything close to that optimistic request was highly unlikely.

What happened instead, though, was a stunner.

Gov. Chris Gregoire's budget called for no money whatsoever for the WWRP, instead creating something called the Puget Sound Wildlife and Recreation Program.

"She ignored the ranking system that made (the WWRP) successful," said Grist, the WWRC director. "This program funds only the best projects; that's one of the reasons the local politicians like it, as opposed to funding politically popular projects. And this is also a state-wide program; it's not just serving the people in one part of the state."

The House didn't agree with the governor, and in its budget called for \$50 million in WWRP funds. The Senate called for \$20 million for the WWRP, with another \$16 million going to other projects from the WWRP's list that would create jobs, even if temporary ones. Many of those projects, though, hadn't even been earmarked for approval by the WWRP for other reasons, such as a dearth of long-term benefits.

"Some of those projects were really low-ranked on the list," said Rance Block, lands program manager of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. "The WWRP process has been time-tested, and it has a very strenuous evaluation process that puts the stronger projects at the top of the list. By funding the WWRP, the Legislature holds these projects to that high standard."

"If you go in and pick projects off the list for political reasons, you run the risk of funding lower-rated projects that didn't make the grade on their own merit."

In the WWRP's 2011 list of proposed grants, the "Heart of the Cascades" ranked No. 1 of the 11 projects ranked in the Critical Habitat category and would be funded by both the Senate and House versions of the budget, though not the governor's.

Ranking third in that category is \$3.5 million the WDFW would put toward the purchase of about 14,000 privately owned acres in the Rattlesnake Mountain area of Benton County, about 10,000 of it abutting the Hanford nuclear reservation's Arid Lands Ecology Reserve.

The potential purchase has state wildlife managers excited about the idea of turning hunters loose on the troublesome Hanford elk herd. That herd's population has skyrocketed far beyond state management objectives because at the first sound of a hunting rifle, the elk have simply jumped the fence onto the reserve.

Or they've taken refuge on that 10,000-acre stretch of shrub-steppe — where, like the reserve, public hunting has not been allowed. With the Rattlesnake purchase, the WDFW would change that.

“The Tri-Cities area is a pretty big recreational base without a lot of recreation available in the neighborhood,” said WDFW regional director Jeff Tayer. “It’s amazing — as much public land as there is around Hanford, very little of it is available for public access.”

But the money that might create such access through the Rattlesnake purchase isn't likely to be there.

In the House's proposed budget, the Rattlesnake deal barely makes the cut as the last of three Critical Habitat projects to receive funding.

Under the Senate's and Gregoire's budgets, it wouldn't be funded at all.

As the state Legislature adjourned last Friday without a budget deal, necessitating the special session that begins today, everything requiring WWRP funds remained on shaky ground.

The deal at the heart of the “Heart of the Cascades” project was for WDFW — with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and

The Nature Conservancy serving as its partners — to purchase four of the 16 one-mile sections in 2009, six in 2010 and the final six in 2011.

The first four were purchased on schedule with \$1.8 million from the WWRP and \$1.4 million in federal grant money. When the state couldn't obtain sufficient funding in time to make the 2009 purchase, The Nature Conservancy made the purchase with \$2.3 million of its own money — with the understanding that the WDFW would buy it back in 2011.

The WWRP gave the “Heart of the Cascades” — and its \$2.75 million request for state funds — its highest priority. The WDFW already has \$2.2 million toward the project, left over from a 2008 federal grant related to Endangered Species Act conservation funding. But that money requires non-federal matching funds, and if the WWRP money doesn't come through, that federal grant will expire.

And The Nature Conservancy would be left holding a large financial bag.

“They're at risk,” Tayer said. “It's all about managing risk on all sides of this thing.”

Should this week's renewed budgetary wrangling result in the Senate version of the WWRP funding, not that of the House, the "Heart of the Cascades" project will be completed. Supporters of a number of other Central Washington projects, though, will come away quite frustrated.

A \$2.2 million WWRP grant to protect working, productive farmlands in the Cowiche Basin is in the House budget, but not the Senate's. An \$810,000 grant that would have extended the Yakima Greenway 4 1/2 miles toward Naches — and ranked ninth among the 25 statewide trail projects prioritized by the WWRP — didn't make the cut.

The Senate budget, though, would cover seven projects ranked well below the Yakima project, including ones the WWRP ranked 22nd, 23rd and 25th.

That sort of thing has Grist, the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition director, concerned about the future of the WWRP.

"It's a slippery slope," she said. "Once you start to tinker with (the WWRP funding process), then you've got everybody wanting to tinker with it, cherry-picking low-priority projects.

"And once the program starts funding bad projects, ones that are ranked at the bottom of the priority lists ... why would anyone want to fund the program in the future, if it's known for funding bad projects?"