

Budget Has 'Heart of the Cascades' Beating Strongly

By Scott Sandsberry
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The completion of an \$8 million, three-year, multi-phase land acquisition dubbed "the Heart of the Cascades" by its proponents became reality last Thursday when the 2011-13 Capital Budget included \$42 million in funding for Washington Wildlife Recreation Program (WWRP) projects.

The result didn't entirely cover all of the projects approved for funding by the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, the bipartisan coalition that created the WWRP more than two decades ago. The \$42 million was far less than the \$70 million the program had received in the current biennium.

But it was closer to the \$50 million in WWRP funding called for in the state House's original budget than the Senate budget's \$20 million.

"This was a good outcome from our perspective, because there was so much tension about the capital budget this year and the debt limit," said Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife regional director Jeff Tayer, whose agency will now be another large step closer to erasing the public-and-private checkerboard ownership in areas critical to wildlife management.

"As it came out was fantastic, and it will finish that Bald Mountain acquisition."

The Heart of the Cascades moniker refers to the six-by-six-mile area north and east of State Route 410, including areas known to locals as Bald Mountain, Rock Creek, Canteen Flats and Gold Creek.

The \$2.75 million in WWRP funds that will go to the project will enable the WDFW to put toward the final purchase some \$2.2 million in federal funds left over from a 2008 grant related to Endangered Species Act conservation funding. Had the WWRP money not come through in this budget cycle, that federal grant would have expired.

The nearly \$5 million in combined moneys will complete the sale of 16 one-mile squares in that Bald Mountain/Rock Creek area, including the repayment of \$2.3

million to The Nature Conservancy, which paid that much last year to Plum Creek Timber Co. to help WDFW meet the second purchase deadline of the three-year process.

Several other Central Washington projects also received WWRP funding in the Capital Budget, including:

- Middle Fork Ahtanum trailhead and trail, \$275,271 to develop two to four miles of a non-motorized trail and trailhead in the Ahtanum State Forest.
- \$1.89 million to allow the Department of Natural Resources to buy 1,120 acres that will become part of the Klickitat Canyon Natural Resources Conservation Area, providing habitat for sandhill cranes, Mardon skipper butterflies and six rare plant populations.
- Trout Lake Meadow restoration, a \$145,500 grant to the DNR that will restore meadows at the Trout Lake Natural Area Preserve in Klickitat County.
- \$685,857 going to the Columbia Land Trust in that same Trout Lake area, to buy a voluntary land preservation agreement prohibiting further development of 215 acres of the Schmid farm in the Trout Lake valley.