



Kittitas County Land Purchases Increase Recreational Opportunities

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Camping, hunting, floating and fishing may soon become even more accessible in Kittitas County thanks in large part to a state-funded grant program.

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) has pledged nearly \$3.5 million to help purchase 5,496 acres of land in the Manastash, purchase a six-mile stretch of shoreline in the Yakima River Canyon and create new access to the Yakima River near state Route 10. The three Kittitas County projects will receive a portion of \$65 million the state Legislature allocated to WWRP in its 2013-15 capital budget.

“This year is definitely a significant win for all outdoor enthusiasts in Washington state,” said Frances Dinger, a spokesperson with the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, the nonprofit that founded WWRP in the late 1980s and now serves as a watchdog for the program and state funding for conservation and outdoor recreation. “We think that this was definitely a victory this year.”

Pinning down an average amount the WWRP receives can be difficult, Dinger said. The total amount given to WWRP can fluctuate, and the Legislature allocated \$42 million to the program last biennium and as much as \$100 million in past bienniums.

Acquiring land

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife will manage all the land purchased in Kittitas County with WWRP funds if plans for the projects work out, but WDFW Southeast Region Manager Mike Livingston said the acquisitions aren't certain.

“Until everybody has signed on the dotted line, you can definitely say it's not a done deal,” Livingston said.

The Heart of the Cascades project aims to purchase land from Plumb Creek Timber Co. Plans for the Bighorn-Yakima Access would purchase land from a private landowner. Neither of those deals have been completed. But Plum Creek

has cooperated on the Heart of the Cascades project, Livingston said, and the company provided a letter of support.

“Getting the land owner on board early is essential for success of a (WWRP grant) application,” Dinger said. “If there’s not support from the landowner then the parcel can’t really be purchased.”

Livingston declined to name the landowner involved in the Bighorn-Yakima project.

“Plum Creek is a big owner,” Livingston said. “Everybody knows who they are, but when we’re dealing with private individuals, we don’t divulge much information about them.”

Thirteenth Legislative District Rep. Judy Warnick (R-Moses Lake), who sits on the House Capital Budget Committee, gave critical support to WWRP in the Legislature, Dinger said.

“She has a lot of constituents that are hunters, and anglers and just in general outdoor enthusiasts,” Dinger said. “We’re incredibly grateful for her work.”

Warnick said she supports WWRP for the most part. She thinks access for outdoor enthusiasts will be the prime advantage provided by Kittitas County land acquisitions funded in this year’s state budget. That access could help boost tourism in the area and increase revenue for hotels and restaurants, Warnick said. She likes to recreate in natural areas herself and describes her husband as an avid hunter and fisherman.

“If the amount of money he spends on hunting and fish equipment is an indication, there’s a lot of jobs out there,” Warnick said.