

BPA working to protect disappearing Willamette Valley habitats

Local News

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Posted on : December 3, 2009 at 5:42 am

Portland, Ore. - Rare and endangered Willamette Valley wildlife have gained nearly 500 acres of newly protected habitat, including some of the best remaining slices of native wetlands, prairies and oak woodlands, through four recent purchases of land and conservation easements funded by the Bonneville Power Administration.

Sensitive species from the endangered Fender's blue butterfly to the western meadowlark, Oregon's state bird, depend on the habitat, which is some of the most imperiled in the Pacific Northwest and faces pressure from development. Less than 2 percent of the Willamette Valley's native upland prairie remains. Only 5 percent of original prairie and oak woodlands remain.

"We're taking advantage of a rare and important opportunity to protect critical habitat that will only become more valuable and important to Oregon and its wildlife," said Russell Hoeflich, Oregon director for The Nature Conservancy, which purchased one parcel and an easement on another with BPA funds.

The new protections include:

- * A conservation easement on a 152-acre parcel in Polk County, adjacent to the 2,492-acre Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge. It is one of the best remaining examples of Willamette Valley prairie and supports one of the largest known populations of Fender's blue butterfly. The Nature Conservancy will hold the easement and restore about 30 acres of agricultural land to upland prairie.
- * Purchase of 10.45 acres for addition to The Nature Conservancy's Willow Creek Preserve just outside Eugene. TNC will restore the sheep pasture to native prairie while protecting it from residential development. The parcel connects two of the largest populations of Fender's blue butterfly and other rare plants and animals.
- * A conservation easement on a 198-acre farm just south of Albany, near Bower's Rock State Park. This property expands a network of protected lands along the main stem of the Willamette River. The Greenbelt Land Trust will work with the property owner to manage the land, reconnecting the Little Willamette side channel to the river and providing habitat for steelhead and chinook.
- * A conservation easement on a 120-acre farm in Polk County north of the Luckiamute State Natural Area at the confluence of the Willamette, Luckiamute and Santiam Rivers. River confluences support diverse fish and wildlife. The Greenbelt Land Trust will restore oak savanna, prairie and wetlands.

All the parcels fall within high priority conservation opportunity areas outlined by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Oregon Conservation Strategy.

BPA ratepayers are funding the protection efforts in cooperation with The Nature Conservancy, Greenbelt Land Trust and ODFW to help mitigate impacts of the construction and operation of federal dams in the Willamette River system. The nearly 500 acres — roughly 400 football fields worth of habitat — bring the total Willamette Valley lands protected by BPA funding to about 6,200 acres.

"A focus for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is to not only protect the valuable wildlife attributes of the individual properties but to add to a larger conservation network of properties in biologically important areas of the Willamette Valley," said Michael Pope, ODFW wildlife mitigation coordinator.

Conservation easements permanently limit development. While the land remains in private ownership and on local tax rolls, the habitat may be managed and restored by landowners, local conservation agencies or municipalities.

"The protection of these lands is of great value to fish and wildlife because the habitat is so rich and diverse and represents some of the last remaining native habitats in the Willamette," said Bill Maslen, BPA's Fish and Wildlife director.

BPA's fish and wildlife mitigation program has protected more than 300,000 acres in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana since 1980 to mitigate the impacts of federal dams on fish and wildlife. BPA works with project partners to identify important fish and wildlife projects and then funds protection and restoration activities to improve the habitat value.

BPA is a not-for-profit federal electric utility that operates a high-voltage transmission grid comprising more than 15,000 miles of lines and associated substations in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana. It also markets more than a third of the electricity consumed in the Pacific Northwest. The power is produced at 31 federal dams operated by the Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation and one nuclear plant in the Northwest and is sold to more than 140 Northwest utilities. BPA purchases power from seven wind projects and has more than 2,000 megawatts of wind interconnected to its transmission system.