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How to Get the Job Done: Conservation Tools

Volunteer Conservation is the Conservation Strategy's Primary Focus

Nature provides services to communities and economies, such as clean drinking water, habitat connectivity and replenished soil. These services are difficult and expensive to replicate artificially. For instance, a single farm can provide a variety of benefits including agricultural products, flood management, habitat connectivity and nutrient recycling. These contributions benefit society at large. Compensation for them helps the farmer.

Forty-six percent of Oregon land is privately owned. Private land contributes greatly to Oregon's fish and wildlife conservation: many fish and wildlife species use habitats on private land and some species are dependent on habitats found primarily on private land. Achieving the goals of this Conservation Strategy will depend on voluntary efforts by landowners and land managers across Oregon. In order to involve private landowners in a pro-active approach to conservation, voluntary cooperative tools and programs are critical. Thus they are a central focus of this Conservation Strategy.

Publicly owned lands also are important to species and habitat conservation in Oregon, and some voluntary conservation tools apply to public lands as well as private lands. Some public lands could provide greater conservation benefits through restoration efforts or changes in management activities. Coordination of land uses and management activities on adjacent lands is important for both private and public landowners because species, habitats, and water tend to ignore property boundaries. Floods, droughts, diseases, wildfires, and invasive species cross property boundaries, requiring that people coordinate efforts to effectively conserve ecological and economic interests.

There are dozens of voluntary programs that contribute to habitat conservation. Some programs are administered by state agencies, while others are federally funded or offered by private organizations. Volun-

tary programs for habitat conservation generally fall into one or more of these categories:

- Direct funding
- Tax benefits (income tax credits, income tax deductions, property tax benefits)
- Certification programs and other marketing approaches
- Conservation commodity trading programs (e.g., water rights acquisition and leasing; pollution credits; transfer of development rights)
- Conservation banking
- Information, training, and technical assistance
- Land acquisition, conservation easements, and land exchanges
- Landowner recognition
- Regulatory assurances for the federal Endangered Species Act
- Regulatory and administrative streamlining

Descriptions of the primary programs available in Oregon are in Appendix III.

Each landowner's circumstance has unique variables that will influence which voluntary conservation tools would be most appropriate. These variables include: landowner interests and priorities; habitat and species present; habitat quality and quantity; program purpose, criteria and requirements; and long-term costs and benefits. Some landowners will weigh the pros and cons of growing habitat instead of more conventional agricultural crops or making exchanges that shift land from private to public ownership. Ideally, Oregonians collectively will provide the financial incentives to make habitat conservation an economically viable option for willing landowners.

Currently, however, some statewide programs do not provide persuasive incentives for landowners and do not address high priority conservation goals with a multi-species or habitat approach. When con-

sistent with program intent and legislative direction, these tools can be adjusted to ensure that their delivery is strategic and that they address high priority fish and wildlife conservation needs across Oregon.

Building upon Success: Some Recommendations for Improving Current Incentive Programs

Ideally, effective programs would be adaptable to the needs of individual landowners, unique ecological conditions and strategic conservation goals. For landowners, effective programs would be easy to access, understand, and offer desired benefits. They would offer options for customizing programs to specific parcels of land. For species and habitats, effective programs would be consistent with statewide and local conservation goals, cluster efforts and effects across scales, and provide long-term conservation benefits. In addition, programs should provide for monitoring to measure effectiveness and encourage adaptation.

The following list identifies ten of the biggest opportunities to help prioritize efforts and leverage resources. For some programs, state or federal legislation directs incentive program priorities. Although any modifications to these programs will need to work within the legislative intent, there are opportunities to increase conservation benefit while meeting programs' primary purposes.

- 1. Focus on conservation goals** –Align incentive programs with regional and statewide conservation goals, plans, and priorities.
- 2. Focus on multiple key habitats and species** – Increase the breadth of habitats and species addressed in existing incentive programs.
- 3. Be strategic rather than opportunistic in program delivery** – Focus investments on Strategy Habitats, Strategy Species, and in Conservation Opportunity Areas. Cluster efforts where habitats or issues cross ownership boundaries. However, make some programs available to interested landowners across the state, including those outside of priority areas.
- 4. Provide monitoring of ecological outcomes** – Learn what works and adapt accordingly at both the project and programmatic levels.
- 5. Improve coordination between agencies, programs, and partners** – Build upon existing partnerships between agencies to strengthen coordination, review programs, streamline processes, assist landowners, and share information.
- 6. Provide adequate funding** –Develop stable long-term state and federal funding sources. Carefully prioritize efforts to make best use of existing funds. Take advantage of underutilized federal programs available to Oregon.

- 7. Increase program participation** – Increase landowner involvement by including them in decision-making processes, increasing flexibility, and conducting outreach to increase awareness.
- 8. Simplify complex administrative processes** – Where possible, improve administrative efficiency, simplify paperwork, standardize application forms and processes between programs, streamline processes, increase assistance to landowners in filling out forms and meeting regulatory requirements, empower landowners to manage projects through training and networking, and ensure deadlines are reasonable for landowners.
- 9. Provide more technical support** – Build upon existing programs to provide biological and administrative advice and assistance.
- 10. Look for ways to increase staffing** – Provide adequate funding to attract and retain program delivery staff over time.

Coordination of existing programs will be the best way to expand the capacity of programs to include a growing number of interested landowners and local organizations. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife will look for opportunities to coordinate with other regulatory agencies to improve regulatory certainty and administrative streamlining for incentive programs. Mechanisms should be developed to coordinate existing voluntary incentive programs within the state. To the extent possible, a central location (“one-stop shopping”) should be developed where landowners could go to get information on a variety of different programs. Technical assistance in permitting or designing restoration projects make it more likely that voluntary programs that appeal to landowners will get used. Investment in local organizations like watershed councils – critical players in Oregon’s habitat conservation – is a means for providing locally adapted technical assistance, information and training, and project management. Ultimately, agencies need to improve existing programs and fill in gaps with new programs to link efforts on public lands with stewardship on private lands.

Recommendations for New or Expanded Voluntary Conservation Tools

For effective implementation of this Conservation Strategy, Oregon needs to develop new programs to meet statewide conservation goals while addressing complex local and statewide social and economic issues. Some programs will need additional funding or staff. All new programs will require creativity, partnerships, and a commitment to improving voluntary conservation tools and programs. Some recommendations for new voluntary conservation tools include:

- 1. Develop business opportunities and other market-based approaches.** - A conservation marketplace is appearing in the

state. There are new business opportunities for landowners to market products that in turn help conserve the state's fish and wildlife resources. Native plant nurseries, juniper products, sustainably managed timber, organic produce, and certification programs are making conservation profitable. In some areas, removing encroaching small-diameter trees can restore habitats with historically open understories, while reducing the risk of uncharacteristically severe wildfire by reducing fuel loads and removing ladder fuels. Developing markets for these small-diameter trees can create jobs, contribute to local economies, and help pay for restoration. Strategic investment in restoration projects such as culvert replacement and invasive species control could also support job creation in some rural areas, while meeting fish and wildlife conservation goals. These efforts can be further promoted and expanded. They can also serve as role models for new innovative economic and marketing approaches.

2. **Expand conservation banking to a statewide approach -**

Conservation banks can benefit landowners and developers, while providing a means for attracting investment in high priority habitats and meeting local land use goals. In this approach, habitat values are converted to credits that serve as currency between investors and landowners. The number of credits held by each bank is based on acreage, habitat quality, and level of restoration. Traditionally, banks have been a means for developers or transportation departments to mitigate for impacts to regulated resources like wetlands or listed species. Depending on local considerations, on-site mitigation may be the most appropriate approach in order to benefit the impacted populations and local habitats. Also, existing state and federal regulations require on-site mitigation in some circumstances. However, off-site mitigation may be appropriate to achieve larger-scale habitat conservation goals. Conservation banks could be expanded for broader uses at larger scales. As an example, the Willamette Partnership is forming a conservation banking system in the Willamette Basin that they hope will serve as a prototype for Oregon.

3. **Seek funding opportunities for Oregon's Flexible**

Incentives Account - Voluntary conservation tools require adequate funding, and new tools need start-up investments. In 2001, the Oregon Legislature created a Flexible Incentives Account to provide flexibility in funding innovative projects that implement statewide, regional, or local conservation plans. The account can receive private or public funds, and is administered by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. To date, no funds have been committed to the Flexible Incentives Account.

However, there are opportunities to fund the Flexible Incentives Account through donations, business partnerships, and pooling resources. If funded, this account could be used to launch new programs or support revision of existing programs to meet statewide priorities.

4. **Develop and expand local citizen-based partnerships -**

Unorthodox partnerships—people working together across disciplines, ideologies, economic strata and geography—are boundless sources of inspiration and energy. Such partnerships have formed to cooperatively address local natural resource issues, sometimes as an alternative approach to years of conflict. These partnerships can engage citizens, strengthen communities, increase information sharing, help plan and implement conservation projects, and come up with innovative solutions.

5. **Support local multi-purpose approaches -** Local governments play a role in assessing and conserving habitats, under statewide planning goals. Maintenance and restoration of natural areas can also meet community needs for recreation and quality of life. Programs such as the West Eugene Wetlands can meet multiple objectives, including wetland mitigation, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation, flood management, water quality, and education programs.

6. **Provide "One-Stop Shopping" for delivery of incentive programs -** Incentive programs are administered by an array of agencies and organizations. Each program has its own purpose, priorities and processes. Many programs require meeting certain regulations, and restoration work often requires permits, sometimes from several agencies. No single agency or organization provides knowledge of or access to the full selection of programs. Some landowners are unaware of programs, while others are confused and frustrated by the wide array programs and agencies.

Due to logistical and legal limitations, a statewide system of centralized funding and technical assistance may be difficult to achieve. However, there is a need and opportunity to coordinate programs, identify common goals, reduce redundancy and resolve conflicts between programs. Through "one-stop shopping" agency staff, extension agents, local organizations, and/or consultants could serve as liaisons between programs and landowners, providing technical and administrative assistance as needed.

7. **Create a statewide registry for tracking conservation actions and programs -** A statewide registry will allow agencies and conservation partners to track, analyze and understand levels and patterns of participation in habitat conservation pro-

grams. It can be used to streamline reporting processes, target funding to address unmet conservation priorities, recognize landowners, and evaluate program success. Ideally, it should include a database and mapping capability, be accessible through the Internet, and protect the privacy of landowners by providing non-identifying information. The first step would be to establish a spatially-explicit database of the existing conservation network composed of national, state and local protected areas plus restoration, mitigation and other projects that enhance fish and wildlife habitat and ecosystem integrity. This database would be then continually amended with a state-level registry of conservation actions, as they occur.

- 8. Develop new incentive programs or expand existing ones to fill identified needs** - Currently, not all Strategy Habitats can be conserved through existing landowner assistance programs. For example, there are few financial assistance programs for forestland or urban landowners. Similarly, there is currently no program that supports landowners who provide ecosystem services, such as using fields for floodwater management. Some programs could be modified or expanded to fulfill these needs, while still maintaining their original purposes. However, in some cases new programs may be needed to support landowners doing voluntary conservation.



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