

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife
WWRP Urban Wildlife 16 –1350A
Expanded Project Description

West Rocky Prairie 2016

WDFW's West Rocky Prairie 2016 project in south Thurston County includes 745 acres of prairie and oak woodlands habitat. Acquisition of the property will add to the current West Rocky Prairie Unit of the Scatter Creek Wildlife Area to protect one of the largest tracts of unique prairie-oak-wetland habitat in western Washington as called for in the South Puget Prairie Site Conservation Plan. The project would protect existing habitat for three state endangered, two state threatened, two state sensitive, three state candidate, and three state monitor species. Habitat would be made available for the reintroduction of golden paintbrush Mazama pocket gopher and Oregon spotted frog. The acquisition of this site protects the headwaters of salmon-bearing Allen and Beaver Creeks. West Rocky Prairie is a vital piece of a 1,687 acre conservation mosaic for species migrating between Millersylvania State Park (842 acres) to the northwest, WDNR Rocky Prairie Natural Area Preserve (35 acres) to the northeast, and WDFW West Rocky Prairie Wildlife Area Unit (810 acres) to the south.

1. Ecological and Biological Characteristics



The bigger picture. This acquisition is an exceptional opportunity to add to and conserve prairie habitat in south Puget Sound. Its geographic position in relation to already protected/managed prairie, its inhabitation by listed/candidate prairie species, and the unique wetland-prairie oak mima mound complex on site make it ideal. The project is supported by numerous conservation plans including: Willamette Valley-Puget Trough-Georgia Basin Eco regional Assessment (2004); South Puget Prairie Site Conservation Plan (2002); draft Washington State Oregon Spotted Frog Recovery Plan (2013); Conservation Prairie-Oak Butterflies in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia (2011); draft Washington State Status Report for the Olympic Mudminnow (1999); and the draft Mazama Pocket Gopher Status Update and Recovery Plan (2013).

Uniqueness and significance of the site. This West Rocky Prairie acquisition site is unique in regards the size of the property and its availability in the south Puget Sound area. Of all the parcels containing prairie soils in Thurston County, less than 2% are over 40 acres in size and 0.08% are 500 acres or greater. Thus, parcels such as this at 745 acres are extremely rare. In addition, the entire 745 acres is intact, another unique feature of this property.

Prairies are one of the rarest habitats in the United States and native outwash prairie is extremely rare with only 20 extant areas in the world; Rocky Prairie is one of five remaining quality examples in Washington. Approximately 10% of the original South Puget Sound prairie habitat remains and of that, 3% is considered high quality. WDFW Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy recognizes the prairie-oak woodland mosaic as an important habitat type for nine animal species of greatest conservation need. West Rocky Prairie has been recommended for protection by the Interagency Prairie Landscape Working Group [WDNR,USFWS, CNLM, Friends of Puget Prairie, WDFW, JBLM and Thurston County] within the South Puget Sound Prairies Site Conservation Plan to serve as the basis for future conservation and restoration efforts. This regional conservation plan highlights Rocky Prairie and a few other sites as the most important additions to the network of protected prairies in the South Puget Sound. The site ranks in the highest category of the WDFW Lands 20/20 prioritization matrix having both high conservation value and significant vulnerability to development. This property supports 13 listed or priority wildlife and vegetative species.

Fish and Wildlife Species or Communities. South Puget Sound prairies and oak woodlands support a unique flora and fauna. The area is one of only two remaining sites in the Puget Trough that once contained all of the prairie specialist butterflies including Mardon Skipper, Puget Blue, Whulge Checkerspot, Valley Silverspot, Coastal Woodland Skipper, Juba Skipper, Sonora Skipper, Oregon Branded Skipper, Dunn Skipper, as well as the oak specialist, the Propertius' Duskywing. Oregon Vesper Sparrow, a state candidate and federal species of concern, are found on the property. Prairie species conservation is dependent on expansive non-fragmented habitat, which this project provides. Mima Mounded prairie is a core feature of this site, which is rated as medium high for both conservation value and vulnerability in the Willamette Valley-Puget Trough-Georgia Basin Ecoregional Assessment (WDFW/The Nature Conservancy 2004). Coho, Cutthroat trout and Olymptic Mudminnow can be found on the acquisition site.

Quality of Habitat. The habitat types on this parcel include prairie, mima mounds, oaks, riparian, wetland, and second and old growth coniferous forest. High quality wetlands are found in the northern half of the property, including shallow emergent wetlands supporting an abundance of amphibians and potentially state endangered/federal candidate Oregon spotted frogs. The wetlands and a stream on the north end form the headwaters of salmon-bearing Allen and Beaver Creek.

All remaining prairies in South Puget Sound have been impacted by non-native invasive plants and require some level of restoration and this site is no exception. WDFW plans to implement this restoration with funds from a USFWS grant. A portion of the site formerly prairie was mined under a 2012 mining permit. If acquired, WDFW proposes to work under the reclamation plan to restore that area back to prairie (soils and seeding). The WDFW prairie ecologist indicates this property was one of only three privately held lowland prairie sites worthy of habitat restoration. Plant inventories in the summer 2009 identified 23 prairie plant species on site, including host plants for state and federally endangered Taylor's Checkerspot butterflies.

2. Species & Communities with Special Status

This property historically supported state and federally endangered Taylor's Checkerspot butterflies and state endangered and federal candidate Mardon Skipper butterflies; habitat for one has been confirmed on site. Taylor's checkerspots are currently restricted to a small scattering of about seven populations in Washington. The expanded West Rocky Prairie Wildlife Area Unit would be an ideal site for reintroduction/augmentation of both butterflies. Surveys in 2009 confirmed the presence of Puget Blues, Oregon Branded Skipper, Valley Silverspots, Juba skipper, and Sonora skipper and thus habitat and conditions to support priority butterflies remain. Priority plant species on the site according to the WDNR Natural Heritage Program include white-top aster, small-flowered trillium and Hall's aster. Additional priority plant species located just offsite and highly likely to be found on the acquisition property include water howellia, blue toadflax, and dense sedge.



The Oregon spotted frog is a Northwest endemic but its range has been reduced by as much as 90% (USFWS 2013). Spotted frogs were listed as state endangered in 1997 and proposed as a federally-threatened in 2014. The most significant factor contributing to the decline of Oregon spotted frogs is the loss and alteration of wetland habitat. WDFW's West Rocky Prairie on the southern boundary of this acquisition site supports the third largest breeding population of spotted frogs in Thurston County. Habitat for spotted frogs is available on site and of good quality, intensive surveys are needed to confirm presence/absence. Acquiring this property would protect the hydrology that directly affects the Beaver Creek breeding population and could serve as a potential reintroduction site, provided the species is not already occupying the site.

State and federally threatened Mazama pocket gophers were reintroduced to WDFW's West Rocky Prairie Wildlife Area Unit to the south from 2010-2012. The population is successfully reproducing and has expanded northward; gophers are likely on this property currently. Pocket gophers have become a politically contentious species considering they often occupy private, developable lands. Securing publically-owned properties such as this on which pocket gopher can persist alleviates some of that pressure.

3. Manageability and Viability



Immediacy of threat to site. Thurston County is the seventh smallest county in the state, but the sixth most populous. Tumwater, less than 5 miles from this acquisition site, is the third largest city in Thurston County with almost three times the state growth rate. This acquisition property directly connects to the I-5 corridor within 3 miles and thus has easy accessibility if developed. Collectively, the threat of development for this acquisition property is extremely high. The target property is owned by the Port of Tacoma, has a current gravel-mining permit and is on the market. The property is zoned Rural Residential (R 1/20) which could allow approximately 30 units at full buildout. As a public entity, the Port is pressured to recoup its investment thru sale of the

property, especially this property outside its jurisdiction. Collectively the need to sell is urgent and there is an imminent threat for development and/or future mining. WDFW ownership would protect this prairie from those threats.

Long-term viability & enhancement. WDFW owns the adjoining 810-acre West Rocky Prairie Wildlife Area Unit to the south; this acquisition would increase the capacity of our wildlife area from 810 acres to 1,555 acres. Additionally, acquisition of the wildlife area in 2006 resulted in a meandering property line that is difficult to manage. This current proposal would smooth the property boundary line and ease management and access. This acquisition will also secure habitat linkages to the northwest with Millersylvania State Park, the McIntosh Family Estate, Wolf Haven, and WDNR Rocky Prairie Natural Area Preserve. Prairie benefits from low category fires. Public ownership of this property will allow WDFW to conduct low level periodic burns that enhance habitat and remove fuel loads such that catastrophic wildfire is prevented. Ultimately, this will greatly enhance this prairie for listed species.

4. Public Benefit

Gated access to WDFW's West Rocky Prairie Wildlife Area Unit to the south is available from two locations and would allow public easy access to this additional property. The local public currently uses the wildlife area for walking, wildlife watching, and hunting (both big game and upland birds) and would do the same on the acquisition. Publicly accessible hunting and recreational lands of this size are few in urbanized Thurston County; providing that opportunity will be highly beneficial to the public. Local groups conduct volunteer habitat restoration work parties on the wildlife area, which would be expanded to this addition.

This project site includes protection of mounded prairie, a unique ecological feature that is the focus of biological and anthropological research. There are several prairie restoration and species research projects conducted by Evergreen State College and University of Washington on the adjoining wildlife area which would expand to this addition. Perhaps the best role served by the public ownership of this site is that it will buffer the listed species on site from non-climatic stressors of urbanization and habitat fragmentation that are encroaching onto this property. Protecting this site will buffer these listed prairie species and hopefully allow them the space needed to adjust to a changing climate (e.g. build adaptive capacity).

