



Mt. Hood Oaks Acquisition

Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization

Columbia Land Trust is dedicated to conserving and caring for the vital lands, waters, and wildlife of the Columbia River region, through sound science and strong relationships. Since our inception in 1990, we have grown from an all-volunteer nonprofit to one of the largest and most respected land trusts in the Northwest. Over the last three decades,

JEDI Efforts and Impact

Our staff continues to pursue learning opportunities on multiple fronts around the nexus of tribal history, racial justice, and land-related issues. Our DEI Committee has been working with the Chief of Staff to plan, budget, and operationalize activities that support a culture of belonging and increase cultural competency/learning, including facilitated

we have conserved more than 60,000 acres of land in Oregon and Washington, in a focus area that stretches from east of the Cascades, along 250 miles of the Columbia River, to the Pacific Ocean. Our team, recognized nationally as leaders in adaptive land management, stewards nearly 40,000 acres throughout the region. The Land Trust is building an inclusive, community-driven conservation movement on a landscape scale by implementing a 25-year Conservation Agenda that advances strategies rooted in the best available science and leverages collaborative partnerships to maximize effectiveness, impact, and equitable outcomes.

Final Success

Permanently protect the Mt. Hood Oaks project site's 1,945 acres of rare, high-quality Oregon white oak woodlands and savanna, 3 miles of perennial and seasonal streams, and state-priority aspen wetlands from conversion to rural-residential development, which will preserve vital wildlife habitat, ensure permanent public and tribal access, and support regional climate resilience.

Location Details

trainings. In 2024, our learning and ongoing collaborations culminated in: 1) a series of outings in partnership with Bird Alliance of Oregon and Vive NW, to facilitate guided opportunities for BIPOC and Latinx-identifying folks to connect with nature on three lands conserved by Columbia Land Trust; 2) the successful removal of Kwoneesum Dam, a high-priority project led by the Cowlitz Indian Tribe on land acquired by the Land Trust; and 3) the signing of a formal memorandum of understanding between the Chinook Indian Nation and the Land Trust in November, which will guide all future collaboration in land conservation and stewardship.

The 1,945-acre Mt. Hood Oaks property is located in the dry East Cascades ecoregion, directly east of Oregon's tallest peak, Mt. Hood, along the border of two of the most popular wild places in Oregon: the Mt. Hood National Forest and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's (ODFW) White River Wildlife Area. Situated between the great conifer forests of the Cascade Mountains and the open grasslands of the Columbia Plateau, and within two major watersheds—the Deschutes River and 15-Mile Creek—the Mt. Hood Oaks conservation area hosts extraordinary biodiversity and functions as part of an essential wildlife migration and dispersal corridor. This project will conserve its important habitat and scenic open space through fee acquisition and by enabling coordinated, cross-boundary land management opportunities with existing public land neighbors. It will ensure the persistence and connectivity of oak habitats at a scale where ecological processes can function even in the face of a changing climate. It will also provide new and diverse opportunities for people to experience, explore, and learn about the many important features of this dynamic ecosystem. The Mt. Hood Oaks conservation project represents the largest scale effort in Oregon in the history of Columbia Land Trust.

For many decades until the late 1990s, the Mt. Hood Oaks property was owned by a local lumber mill based in Tygh Valley, OR. When that company ceased operations in the 1990s, the property and thousands of additional acres were purchased by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and most were transferred to ODFW and the U.S. Forest Service for permanent conservation. However, due to a funding shortage, Mt. Hood Oaks was sold off and not conserved. Its acquisition now would fulfill a 25-year vision for permanent protection and reconnect a vital wildlife corridor.

Today, the property is highly threatened

by conversion to rural-residential development. Its Mt. Hood views, public road access, and adjacency to public land make it desirable for house sites, and it is divisible into 7 lots. Due to the high threat of conversion to rural-residential development, as well as its combination of intact habitat types and adjacency to other conservation ownerships, this property is the highest oak habitat conservation priority in the region for Columbia Land Trust and public agency partners. The opportunity to acquire the property undivided, with its habitat intact—and at an attainable price—is now.

Biodiversity in Project Area

If successfully conserved, the Mt. Hood Oaks property offers tremendous protection for local biodiversity, resilience under a changing climate, and important connectivity to adjacent protected lands. At the boundary of two regionally important watersheds, the Mt. Hood Oaks project lies within an important ecological transition zone. Ecological transition zones support uncommonly high species diversity and unusual species assemblages. At Mt. Hood Oaks, conifer forests with cedar-lined streams shift into open grasslands, dry-desert adapted juniper habitats merge with riparian aspen stands and beaver-rich wetlands, and old-growth oaks anchor the middle ground. The Mt. Hood Oaks property ranks as a mid-high conservation priority using the Climate Atlas composite model, and a 2015 report by The Nature Conservancy highlights this property's expected resilience to climate change due to its topographic diversity and transitional habitat types. Its long-term conservation is expected to play an outsized role in helping species and ecosystems adapt to a rapidly changing future in this landscape.

This project will permanently conserve one of the largest remaining unprotected transitional pine-oak habitat properties in the East Cascades of Oregon. Its conservation is an important first step in linking the Mt. Hood National Forest with state and federal lands along the Deschutes River. The site will ensure habitat connectivity for myriad neotropical migratory bird species, federally threatened northern spotted owl, federally endangered gray wolf, state sensitive western gray squirrel, federally sensitive northern red-legged frog, and state sensitive western toad. It will also protect a reach of Larch Creek that supports river lamprey, a federal species of concern that is also a culturally important species for the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (CTWS). Larch Creek is a key tributary to 15-Mile Creek which supports

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

Conserving Mt. Hood Oaks will provide scenic open space, protection of local flora/fauna, and a place for the community to experience these defining features of the East Cascades ecoregion. The region has long been important to diverse user groups for recreation, and this project will offer opportunities for locals and visitors alike to engage with nature through new public access. The adjacent White River Wildlife Area and the Mt. Hood National Forest are the most visited wildlife area and national forest in Oregon, due to their proximity and easy access to the Portland/Vancouver metro area (30,000 and 4.4 million visitors, respectively). ODFW land managers estimate that, if conserved, Mt. Hood Oaks could expect nearly 800 hunters each year during approved turkey, deer, and elk seasons. Countless additional hikers, wildlife watchers, botanists, and students are also anticipated. Once conserved, the site will be open to non-motorized public access for hiking, wildlife viewing, and hunting April 1–November 30 each year (winter closure is requested by White River Wildlife Area managers to relieve pressure on wildlife at a vulnerable time of year).

In addition to public access, the connectivity offered by this property will facilitate coordinated fire management. Concern about wildfire looms large in Wasco County after three large fires several years ago consumed over 133,000 acres and took one life. Habitat management by the Land Trust that enhances fire-resilient oak systems will reduce the severity of wildfire if it occurs, helping save public money on future expenses related to fire protection. Additional economic benefits to the community include public savings on infrastructure, utilization of local contractors and mills for habitat enhancement/restoration projects, and payment of excise taxes (when forest thinning is prescribed) and voluntary real estate taxes (see #8).

federally threatened mid-Columbia steelhead.

In sum, the site's high-quality transitional pine and oak habitat contains exceptional biodiversity values, contributes to an existing ecological network, and improves connectivity on a landscape scale. This wildlife migration and dispersal corridor is anticipated to facilitate species' resilience to climate change by providing a pathway for movement to the higher elevations of the Cascade Mountains.

Strategy & Timeline For Final Success

The overarching goal of the Mt. Hood Oaks conservation project is to preserve critically important Oregon White oak habitat in Oregon's East Cascades. Unlike other large, private ownerships in the region, the Mt. Hood Oaks understory habitat has not been significantly altered and its old oaks thrive, making it a rare conservation opportunity. Columbia Land Trust will pursue fee simple acquisition as the conservation strategy for this property. Fee simple ownership is the only tool that will protect the property's existing habitat and allow the active management necessary for its rich conservation values to persist in the long term. The proposed project implements strategies articulated in the Land Trust's 25-year Conservation Agenda, the State of Oregon's Conservation Strategy, and Pacific Birds' Prairie, Oaks, and People Investment Strategy.

Overall project goals include:

1. Permanently protected public access for recreation. Under Columbia Land Trust ownership, the entire project area will be open to public access for hiking, wildlife watching, and hunting.
2. Local economic benefits. We will engage local contractors for land management and forest restoration, work with community-based organizations and local leaders to improve management for multiple outcomes (recreation, habitat, and others), and facilitate safe tribal access for hunting and foraging.
3. Long-term management for conservation. A final landscape management plan, completed by December 2026, will ensure sustainable management of the Mt. Hood Oaks property by fulfilling monitoring, community engagement, and stewardship priorities.

To date, Columbia Land Trust has already completed the following objectives in service of these goals:

1. Review of the preliminary title report to

Key Decision Makers

This project leverages key partnerships between CTWS, Columbia Land Trust, ODFW, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, private donors, the U.S. Forest Service, and the East Cascades Oak Partnership (ECOP). ECOP is a collaboration between state and federal resource management agencies, local and national wildlife advocacy groups, nature conservancies, conservation districts, county leaders, and industry groups. Oak habitat acquisition (like this project) is a core strategy for protecting oak systems in ECOP's strategic plan.

Two partners who have heavily championed this project are ODFW and the Mt. Hood National Forest. Both are neighboring landowners whose work is enhanced through the project's improved wildlife connectivity and expanded public access opportunities. Conservation of Mt. Hood Oaks will facilitate cross-boundary stewardship opportunities with each, and both agencies are actively facilitating opportunities to secure habitat restoration funding once the property is conserved.

Mt. Hood Oaks is located within CTWS ceded territory. Since conceptual development of the project in 2018, they have offered letters of support and on-the-ground guidance through access to their natural resources department staff. Conservation is an expressed priority for the Tribes as the original stewards of the site.

The Land Trust also communicates openly and regularly with the Mt. Hood Oaks seller and with Wasco County Commissioners. The commissioners have expressed their appreciation for conserving Mt. Hood Oaks provided that the site is made available for public access, and so long as its conservation does not negatively impact county resources through loss of tax base. In response, the Land Trust has committed to a stewardship endowment that includes both the cost of land management as well as the cost of paying voluntary, annual real estate



understand potential encumbrances on the property that would pose threats to the site's ecological features. None were found; the title report is exceptionally clean and presents no anticipated challenges to the transaction.

2. Completion of the Land Trust's internal hazardous materials assessment to document the potential for hazardous materials presence or contamination. No contamination was found.

3. Initial communication with neighbors (public agencies and private landowners) to understand land use history.

4. Communication with the Wasco County Board of Commissioners about the Land Trust's conservation intent and its approach to conservation, resulting in both positive and neutral feedback (none opposing).

5. Engagement with CTWS to understand and respond to tribal priorities related to this landscape and the specific site. The primary priorities are habitat management to benefit First Foods species and provision of safe access.

6. Baseline conditions documentation to characterize conservation values, management needs, and concerns. This included consultation with wildlife experts, tribal, and natural resource agency staff.

7. Habitat mapping, determination of desired future conditions, completion of a management plan outline, and development of a long-term stewardship cost estimate to fund management in perpetuity.

Key objectives that will be completed during the grant period and immediately following include:

1. By February 2026: Completing a contracted appraisal and appraisal review to establish fair market value for the property and entering into a purchase and sale agreement.

2. By May 2026: Finalizing transaction and stewardship due diligence, focused on ensuring no environmental liabilities or encroachments and that culturally important resources are identified.

3. By May 2026: Completing an environmental site assessment.

4. By October 2026 or sooner: Finalizing closing and acquiring the Mt. Hood Oaks property.

5. Beyond the grant period: Designing a



long-term stewardship plan for the site in close collaboration with CTWS and ODFW. This process takes many months to develop management strategies that meet legal, cultural, and organizational priorities.

6. Beyond the grant period: Stewardship of Mt. Hood Oaks in perpetuity. Land stewardship is critical to protecting the long-term viability of oak habitats, which are a maintenance-dependent species in this region.

During the grant period and as part of a larger capital campaign fundraising effort, the Land Trust is raising stewardship funds for the Mt. Hood Oaks property to ensure its care long into the future. The Land Trust has been at the forefront of managing and restoring oak woodlands in the East Cascades ecoregion for over 15 years, and the project area is similar to properties the Land Trust has conserved and manages in Washington State, including nearly 12,000 acres in the Klickitat River watershed. The Land Trust and partners will utilize a suite of land management actions (such as prescribed fire, conifer thinning, and noxious weed control) to help maintain high quality habitat at Mt. Hood Oaks well into the future.

Elevate Voices

The community in rural Wasco County is broadly supportive of Columbia Land Trust's conservation work, evidenced by attendance and statements of support at community meetings about the Mt. Hood Oaks project. To sustain this support, the Land Trust is working directly with CTWS as described above, with communities neighboring the Mt. Hood Oaks site through public and individual outreach, and with the broader Wasco County community via ECOP. The long-term sustainability and repeatability of our conservation work requires that the conservation benefits of our work are broadly shared. At Mt. Hood Oaks, this means:

- coordinating forest management actions with neighboring agencies to improve ecological health and reduce fire risk across a large landscape—a core community priority in Wasco County;
- providing non-motorized public access—a local and regional priority;
- enhancing habitat to benefit wildlife—a priority for wildlife lovers, from bird watchers to hunters; and
- ensuring dedicated staff to respond to all neighbor and public engagement needs.

As previously noted, we are specifically and intentionally partnering with CTWS because this project is within the Tribes' ceded territory. They are very supportive of this project and helped elevate its

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes

1. Permanent protection of 1,945 acres of oak, pine, and riparian woodlands, benefiting resident and migratory birds within the Pacific Flyway as well as multiple threatened, endangered, and conservation-priority mammals, fish, reptiles, and amphibians.
2. Landscape connectivity between Mt. Hood Oaks, the Mt. Hood National Forest, and ODFW's White River Wildlife Area. The project extends the 30,000-acre White River Wildlife Area to the north by two miles and the 1.1 million-acre Mt. Hood National Forest to the east by three miles (adjacency with 1.13 million acres of contiguous state/federal conserved habitat).
3. Enhanced climate and wildfire resilience in the East Cascades through avoided conversion of climate resilient habitat and active land stewardship.
4. Development of a land management plan that prioritizes wildlife habitat and tribal and public access, benefiting from the expertise of CTWS, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the U.S. Forest Service.



priority through ECOP (where their staff are steering committee members). CTWS wildlife staff have indicated that conserving Mt. Hood Oaks will benefit mule deer specifically, which is an important First Food species for tribal members. The Tribes may be a future partner through restoration of prescribed fire on this property, and Land Trust and Tribal staff have been in conversation about how to advance this shared priority.

Land Trust staff will use this property to expand guided hiking and nature watching opportunities with local students and members of historically underserved communities via affinity groups, such as the Latino-led justice group Comunidades in Hood River and Vive NW from Portland.

TCA Funding Plan

TCA's grant will specifically support the staff time and due diligence required to bring the Mt. Hood Oaks land acquisition to completion, helping the Land Trust conserve some of the most beloved recreation and habitat values in Oregon. This includes transaction costs such as appraisal and appraisal review, cultural resources surveys, environmental assessments, and Land Trust staff time: Conservation Lead, Transaction Coordinator, General Counsel, and Natural Area Manager (stewardship team staff responsible for management plan).

How long it took to complete application

We have previously worked with TCA to conserve nearly 11,000 acres along Washington's Klickitat River and nearly 300 acres along the West Fork Washougal River. The proposed project will expand on that work, conserving this ecologically vital corridor along the eastern edge of the Cascades. Funding from The Conservation Alliance will also support achievement of match required by the project's largest funder, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.

Confidential Items

Not applicable; however, we request that The Conservation Alliance and member companies alike please coordinate with us in advance regarding any public communications about this project.

Other Relevant Application Details

