



## Disaster Peak Ranch conservation project

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### Proposal Questions

#### Mission/History Of Organization

Formed in 2017, Oregon Desert Land Trust (ODLT) works to conserve wild and working lands for people and wildlife. We work with landowners, Tribal members, land managers, and other partners in a vast region filled with mountains, streams, canyons, and playas. Since our founding, we have conserved over 20,000 acres of private land that

#### JEDI Efforts and Impact

The lands where ODLT is focused are the homelands of the Northern Paiute people. While some lands were ceded to the U.S. by Tribes, many lands were taken by force, confiscation, or coercion from Indigenous peoples. We're working to support Tribal needs and understand their vision for the stewardship of these lands.

contribute to conservation and restoration on over 500,000 acres of public land including Wild and Scenic Rivers, Wildlife Refuges, and neighboring Wilderness areas. These lands are critical to the region's ecology, economies, and communities. By conserving these wild and working lands, we're preserving fish and wildlife habitat, cultural values, recreational access and other important resources.

**Final Success** ODLT's successful efforts will acquire the 2,690-acre Disaster Peak Ranch as well as associated grazing permits on 56,774 acres of surrounding public lands that provide the foundation for conservation and restoration of more than 18 miles of McDermitt Creek and key tributary streams that provide critical habitat for threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout, greater sage-grouse and other sensitive species.

#### Location Details

Over the past year, we hosted a Tribal Gathering as well as numerous other events focused on First Foods and cultural preservation. Dozens of Tribal members attended from three different Tribal Reservations in the region. These events supported Tribal members efforts to continue traditional practices on their homelands, connect across long distances, and discuss career pathways. These connections are helping us learn from each other and have also ensured that Tribal members are providing leadership at the staff, board and advisory council levels of the organization.

Over the past three years, ODLT has partnered with ranchers, Tribes, and state and federal land managers to create the Trout Creek Ranch and Pueblo Mountains Conservation Project. This project benefits ecological, economic and community values on over 534,000 acres of private and public lands stretching from Steens Mountain Wilderness to Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge. To build on this successful effort, ODLT is proposing to acquire Disaster Peak Ranch which spans 2,690 acres of private land and 56,774 acres of public lands grazing permits. This will grow our Trout Creek Ranch project to nearly 600,000 acres.

Disaster Peak Ranch is central to efforts to recover one of the West's most imperiled fish-Lahontan cutthroat trout. These large, bright-orange species of cutthroat were once abundant across thousands of miles of streams in the Great Basin. Today, they are on the brink of extinction because the pristine, cold-water habitat they depend upon has disappeared over the last century. The ranch is also home to significant populations of greater sage-grouse that are connected to lands that ODLT already holds. Habitat models show that this area is particularly resilient to climate change due to its intactness, elevation and relative lack of disturbance.

This acquisition will lay the foundation for ODLT to ultimately: restore over 55 miles of stream habitat for Lahontan cutthroat trout; restore wet meadows for sandhill cranes, long-billed curlews, snowy egrets, and other birds in this critical migration and breeding area of the Pacific Flyway; recover beaver populations throughout the project area; develop adaptive grazing management approaches using virtual fencing and remote sensing technologies, and; permanently conserve private lands within over 120,000 acres of surrounding Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) that are currently proposed for permanent

**Biodiversity in Project Area**

As important as this area is for wildlife today, it will become even more important as climate changes. More than 90% of Disaster Peak Ranch falls within The Nature Conservancy's national Resilient and Connected Landscapes, meaning these lands are highly resilient and connected relative to other important habitats in the surrounding Columbia Plateau ecoregion. A recent connectivity analysis by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife documented "Priority Wildlife Corridors" running through ODLT's Trout Creek Ranch property as well as the proposed Disaster Peak Ranch acquisition. These corridors provide critical connections and pathways between the Owyhee Canyonlands, Steens Mountain Wilderness, Sheldon National Wildlife Refuge, and Hart Mountain Wildlife Refuge.

The acquired lands include private inholdings within the 51,290-acre Fifteenmile Creek Wilderness Study Area, which is currently proposed for permanent protection as Wilderness by Oregon's congressional delegation and dozens of miles of streams that are currently proposed for Wild and Scenic River protections under the River Democracy Act. Numerous state and federal land conservation priorities exist in the project area including: US Fish and Wildlife Service-designated Priority Areas of Concern for Greater sage-grouse; over 50,000 acres of habitat for federally-listed Endangered or Threatened species and State Species of Conservation Concern such as Lahontan cutthroat trout and Greater sage-grouse; the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife designated Trout Creek Mountains Conservation Opportunity Area; and overlap with the 800-mile long Oregon Desert Trail.

**Expected Economic & Recreational Impact**

Wilderness protection by Oregon's congressional delegation.

The Pueblo and Trout Creek Mountains are part of the rich heritage of the Northern Paiute people, a source of livelihood for area farmers and ranchers, and are valued by the public for recreation ranging from hunting to hiking the Oregon Desert Trail. To do our work effectively, ODLT relies on effective partnerships with many other non-profit organizations and partners that create connections to the lands and waters we manage. For example, over the past year we have hosted volunteers with Bird Alliance of Oregon to complete a bird survey on thousands of acres of ODLT land in south Harney County, we collaborated with High Desert Partnership to create conservation job opportunities for members of the Burns Paiute Tribe and Fort McDermitt Tribe at Malheur Wildlife Refuge, and we have hosted volunteers from Oregon Natural Desert Association, Traditional Archers of Oregon, The Nature Conservancy, and Western Rivers Conservancy at various ODLT properties.

Disaster Peak Ranch will grow these efforts and also support the hundreds of hikers using the 800-mile long Oregon Desert Trail which passes through portions of the property and adjacent to the base ranch which provides an important source of water for thru-hikers. We partner closely with local communities and neighboring landowners such as ranchers. Through these partnerships, ODLT's efforts have contributed significantly to the local economy and improving land management in the region. For example, over the past two years we have created three new full-time jobs in Harney County. We have also hired local contractors and purchased equipment in the southeast Oregon region where we work. These efforts to develop project facilities and complete restoration projects have resulted in local expenditures over the past two years exceeding \$1.2M.

**Strategy & Timeline For Final Success**

ODLT has been in conversations with the landowner for several years and we recently finalized and signed an acquisition agreement for the Disaster Peak Ranch property. To facilitate donation of the land and ensure the effort is successful, the acquisition agreement requires considerable ODLT staff, board and volunteer effort over the coming year to comprehensively evaluate the property. The agreement also requires development and review of a conservation management plan in partnership with Western Rivers Conservancy, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Oregon Department of Fish

**Key Decision Makers**

ODLT is committed to using our lands to provide common ground for partnerships and land management approaches that address the challenges and opportunities facing wild and working lands across Oregon's high desert. To do this work effectively and efficiently, we must maintain meaningful relationships with communities and partners throughout the region. Key decision makers and partners in south Harney and Malheur counties include, but are not limited to: regional Tribes, neighboring ranchers and other private landowners, local businesses, Watershed Councils and Soil and Water Conservation Districts,

and Wildlife.

The property is located approximately 30 miles north of lithium mining proposals. Project evaluation requires an extensive analysis of this issue and pending proposals to ensure that ODLT has a full understanding of any threats facing long-term conservation management and that we can avoid future impacts from nearby development. We will continue to visit the property frequently over the next year and meet regularly with the numerous stakeholders such as local ranchers, Tribes, conservation organizations, and state and federal land managers to create the foundation for robust future partnerships.

Site visits will also focus on the completion of appropriate due diligence, completion of project establishment efforts, and the funding of a stewardship reserve to provide permanent conservation management of the property. This will require considerable ODLT staff, board and volunteer effort to comprehensively evaluate the property including, but not limited to, the completion and/or development of: 1) a comprehensive Environmental Site Assessment; 2) property surveys; 3) baseline monitoring reports; 4) title review; 4) evaluation of mineral rights and development potential; 5) review of existing biological and habitat research; and 6) inventory of structures and equipment.

We propose to complete the acquisition of Disaster Peak Ranch by March of 2026.

**Elevate Voices**

ODLT efforts to elevate historically underrepresented groups have focused on bringing Tribal members and families together through gatherings at our nearby Trout Creek Ranch property. Our efforts have focused on partnerships with five regional Tribes. A listening session last year brought together leaders from four regional Tribes to discuss how partnerships to care for these lands could strengthen intergenerational connections and provide career opportunities for Tribal youth. A committee formed to guide future gatherings over the coming years. Another event is in the works to provide an opportunity for neighboring landowners to share their personal history and learn about the deep Tribal history in the region. This was recommended by Tribal members.

ODLT's regional outreach efforts are led by an ODLT board member who is Northern Paiute and serves on Tribal Council of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and an ODLT advisory

state and federal land and wildlife management agencies, community and land health non-profits, Rangeland Fire Protection Associations, and local, state and federal elected officials.

ODLT board and advisory council members hail from each of the five counties where ODLT works and they offer a wide range of expertise such as ranchers, land managers, financial professionals, attorneys, wildlife biologists, non-profit and Tribal leaders, and educators. Through their efforts as well as the work of ODLT staff, we have secured written and/or verbal support for this project from neighboring landowners, members and staff of regional Tribes, local county officials, and state and federal land managers. For example, through our partnership with Western Rivers Conservancy, ODLT will work with US Fish and Wildlife Service and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to implement a conservation management plan that meets the needs of threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout, Greater sage-grouse, and other sensitive wildlife. As part of these efforts, ODLT will coordinate with partners to complete regular monitoring through on-the-ground photo point collection and aerial imagery.

**Measurable On-Ground Outcomes**

- 1) Acquire and conserve the 2,690-acre Disaster Peak Ranch as well as associated grazing permits on 56,774 acres of surrounding public lands;
- 2) Acquire a key inholding within the 51,290-acre Fifteenmile Creek Wilderness Study Area, which is currently proposed for permanent protection as Wilderness by Oregon's congressional delegation;
- 3) Create a restoration strategy for 55 miles of stream habitat for endangered Lahontan cutthroat trout; and
- 4) Develop an adaptive management plan that restores wet meadows for sandhill cranes, long-billed curlews, snowy egrets, and other birds in this critical migration and breeding area of the Pacific Flyway.

council member who is a former Tribal Council member of the Fort McDermitt Tribes. ODLT is meeting with staff at the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone Indian Reservation in the coming months to discuss opportunities to partner on future restoration efforts at Disaster Peak Ranch and on nearby Reservation lands. The Disaster Peak Ranch acquisition will build on the Tribal partnerships being held at ODLT's Trout Creek Ranch property. These include hosting Tribal Gatherings, supporting First Foods collection efforts, growing stewardship partnerships, and facilitating ecological and cultural research in the region.

We are also scheduling interviews with Tribal members for our Sharing Common Ground interview series in partnership with Oregon's poet laureate Ellen Waterston. This project features the deep connections local people have to the high desert to inspire stewardship of this landscape. Though backgrounds and lifestyle may differ, all share a common thread of being caretakers of this landscape and Native perspectives need to be elevated.

**TCA Funding Plan**

TCA's support will contribute significantly to reaching our overall fundraising goal as outlined in the provided budget. It will enable us to continue to engage TCA member groups in on-the-ground stewardship efforts on the property. Lastly, TCA support will serve as an endorsement of the quality of the project and we believe will encourage support from other foundations and individual donors.

**How long it took to complete application**

**Confidential Items**

None

**Other Relevant Application Details**