

2013 Executive Summary

Blue Mountain Land Trust Conservation Plan



Acknowledgements

Blue Mountain Land Trust (BMLT) appreciates the following individuals and organizations for their input toward this conservation plan: Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation; participants in BMLT planning workshops; county planners in Walla Walla, Columbia, Garfield, Asotin, Umatilla and Union counties; BMLT supporters and other community members who completed the online survey.

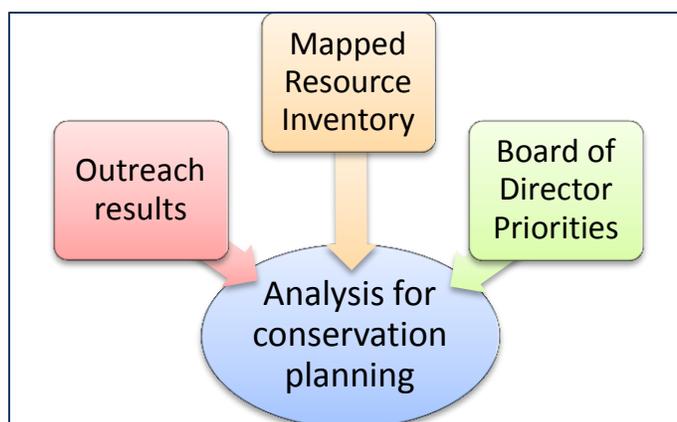
Executive Summary

The Blue Mountain Land Trust (BMLT) mission states that the organization “is dedicated to protecting for future generations the land we love, working farms and forests, watershed habitat and scenic views through voluntary partnerships with private land owners.” To achieve these broad goals, the land trust needs a land conservation plan to help it achieve its mission and respond to the needs in the Blue Mountain region. BMLT seeks to identify important conservation resources on which to focus in the coming years, and to delineate critical landscapes for voluntary land conservation. This plan will help the organization act deliberately, identifying areas of high conservation value and prioritizing privately-owned lands for protection.

The land trust has made good strides in the conservation of private land over the last several years. Since its founding in 1999, BMLT had protected 630 acres in ten conservation easements by 2013. It has successfully conserved wetland and riparian areas, agricultural lands, and wildlife habitat. Its work in recent years has raised the organization’s visibility and landowners are becoming more aware of conservation opportunities on their land.

Now the land trust is at a crossroads. The land trust’s work has been opportunistic, largely taking advantage of funding for salmon recovery. While those conservation successes are significant, the land trust now seeks to understand where it should place its limited resources and to look more broadly at the Blue Mountain region and its diverse conservation values.

The diagram below depicts the process used to develop this plan. It relied heavily on outreach processes (described more fully in Section II). In addition, resource values were mapped (see Section III). The BMLT Board of Directors reviewed the results of those processes and made critical decisions about conservation drivers for prioritizing private land in the service area (Sections IV and V).



The BMLT service area is vast—bridging six counties of the Blue Mountain region in Washington and Oregon. It encompasses four entire counties in southeastern Washington—Walla Walla, Columbia, Garfield and Asotin. The land trust also intends to work in two Oregon Counties—Umatilla and the western portion of Union County. BMLT, while headquartered in

Walla Walla, and completing only Washington projects to date, includes the Oregon counties since they contain the Walla Walla River headwaters and because these counties are underserved by active land trusts. As shown in the table below, the region includes over 4.7 million acres, 72% of it in private hands. The remainder is in public or tribal ownership, with the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation owning over 150,000 acres. Umatilla County is by far the largest county, while Asotin has the smallest acreage.

County	Public Land (acres)	Private Land (acres)	Tribal Land (acres)	Total Acreage	Percent Private
Walla Walla WA	37,598	790,982		828,580	95%
Columbia WA	181,071	377,613		558,684	68%
Garfield WA	113,873	345,267		459,140	75%
Asotin WA	122,713	285,236		407,949	70%
Umatilla OR	459,472	1,444,060	158,790	2,062,322	70%
Union OR*	227,026	168,492		395,518	43%
TOTAL	1,141,753	3,411,650	158,790	4,712,193	72%

* Union County acreages represent only the portion within the BMLT service area.

Focused outreach helped inform the land trust about its service area and its future conservation priorities. Four methods were used to engage the community in the BMLT conservation planning process:

1. Natural Resource Experts Workshop
2. Community Workshop
3. Online Survey
4. Interviews with County Planners

The goals of the outreach were to: 1) inform the community of BMLT’s past and future work; 2) define the main conservation values in the region and their spatial locations; 3) prioritize those values within the six-county BMLT service area; and 4) understand threats to conservation values and their spatial locations. The combined outreach process revealed several key findings:

- BMLT has an important niche in the region particularly as a non-governmental entity that can work closely with landowners. Responses show considerable community interest in the land trust’s mission.
- There is a pronounced need for the land trust to continue building relationships with other organizations and county agencies;
- BMLT’s continued work related to salmon recovery is highly supported, including work related to riparian corridors and water quality.
- All outreach participants endorsed BMLT’s work toward protecting wildlife habitat.
- The community places considerable emphasis on protecting scenic views, open space and recreational access.

- There is somewhat less focus on agricultural resources as a conservation target; however, people unanimously understand its connection to scenic views and the way of life in the region.

BMLT relied on existing sources of data to map critical conservation values in the six-county region. Section III illustrates the spatial distribution of land cover, agriculture, elk summer and winter ranges, trails access, critical fish habitat, and bird habitat conservation areas.

The BMLT Board of Directors and staff developed conservation goals, taking into consideration the results of outreach efforts as well as the resource inventory data shown in Section III. Board members decided on an approach that de-emphasizes the conservation of agricultural land by itself, but focuses more on where agricultural land coincides with the viewscape and other scenic values. Farmland is not currently perceived to be threatened by development, but that could change quickly as economic factors shift. The Board is interested in focusing on three main landscape features, each in a somewhat different manner:

1. Streams, fish habitat, and water quality
2. Foothills of the Blue Mountains
3. Trails

It is not hard to justify conservation efforts that protect critical fish species, water quality, and riparian zones. BMLT has been working to protect stream habitats; the board is interested in adding water quality as an important goal (which overlaps strongly with the foothills focus described below). Riparian zones serve multiple interests: habitat corridors, water quality and potential recreation.

BMLT has listened to its constituents' concern about the threats to scenic views. However, attempting to protect entire viewsheds is unrealistic. Therefore, the land trust will focus on the foothills of the Blue Mountains, where scenic resources combine with diverse bird habitat, elk winter and summer range, grassland and shrub ecosystems, and the headwaters of the regions' streams and rivers (see streams focus above).

BMLT has not, to date, engaged in recreational or trails projects. However, there is some interest in adding that focus in the future. The outreach for this plan shows support for going that direction. A trails project could help engage the community more directly. It might provide an iconic project that the community could rally behind.

To represent the priorities shown above, we used a simple additive scoring system to identify the areas that support the highest values based on important resource values. Each of the following six criteria was given a score of 1:

- Private land at or above 2000 feet
- Bird habitat conservation areas
- Elk winter range
- Elk summer range
- Grasslands
- Shrub/Scrub ecosystems

Critical fish habitat was also mapped and those important streams are shown on the conservation priorities map below. Therefore, it is possible to see where the values listed above coincide with important stream reaches.

As shown on the map below, as many as five of the six values overlapped in a few locations. The green color on the map represents the private land that is at or above 2000 feet but contains no other high-priority resource values. Yellow and orange colors indicate the presence of two to four overlapping values. At the scale of this map, it is difficult to see the small areas where five values overlap; therefore, the red color may not be visible on the map. However, BMLT maintains that digital information and can isolate focal areas where four or five values coincide.

High priority focal areas are found throughout the six-county region, as shown in the table below. Over a million acres represent private land at high elevations that support one other resource value. About half of this land lies in Umatilla County. The areas where three or four values coincide are predominantly in Umatilla and Columbia Counties. Only 1563 acres of land contain five conservation values, about equally divided between Walla Walla and Columbia Counties. All but Union County have many stream systems with high values for critical fish species, with Umatilla, Columbia and Walla Walla Counties the most extensive.

	Resource Values (in acres*)					
County	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Walla Walla	13,020	19,627	20,618	7,020	783	61,068
Columbia	50,491	45,711	44,222	21,216	780	162,420
Garfield	132,161	58,571	845			191,577
Asotin	61,426	114,050	28,081	712		204,269
Umatilla	142,319	350,748	147,913			640,980
Union**	71,082	70,868	21,374	4,945		168,269
Total	470,499	659,575	263,053	33,893	1563	1,428,583

*Acreage is approximate due to the conversion of data from vector to raster and back to vector format.

**Union County acreages represent only the portion of the county within which the BMLT works.

BMLT cannot hope to conserve the entire 1.4 million acres identified in this plan. However, it could, for instance, aim to conserve the nearly 34,000 acres where four resource values overlap. To implement this conservation plan, the land trust needs a closer look in those zones where multiple conservation resources overlap. Analysis at a finer scale will help the land trust better understand ownership patterns, specific geographic features, and resource values.

This plan validates the land trust’s interest in conservation across the Oregon border. Particularly in Umatilla County, abundant resource values warrant conservation on private lands. The outreach for this planning process showed strong community support for the land trust’s mission. BMLT could identify a keystone or iconic project to engage the community, enhance the organization’s visibility, and make a significant conservation impact.

Blue Mountain Land Trust

Strategic Land Conservation Plan

