STATE OF THE LANDS
How land trusts are working together to advance conservation in Oregon
2015
Last July I stood among the leaders of Oregon’s land trusts, taking in breathtaking views from the East Moraine of Wallowa Lake. We had gathered for our annual Coalition of Land Trusts (COLT) board meeting to work on a shared vision for protecting the parks, rivers, forests, and extraordinary lands that make Oregon so special.

It’s been four years since this community banded together to form COLT. Their objective was to create a unified, statewide voice to advocate for the tools and resources land trusts need to fulfill their missions. Up among the high peaks of Wallowa County, I reflected on the work we’ve accomplished and the dynamic relationships we’ve built with partners, elected officials, and community leaders across Oregon who value private land conservation. Today we truly are the coalition we set out to be.

This year’s State of the Lands report shares the progress we are making together, including conserving more than 15,000 acres in 2015. Our coalition was made even stronger last year when Pacific Forest Trust became COLT’s newest member, adding nearly 13,000 acres of protected working forests to further our collective impact.

I invite you to learn more about the good work that’s being done and discover stories of everyday Oregonians helping to invest in Oregon’s unique conservation legacy.

Kelley Beamer, Executive Director
Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts

Cover photo: Sunrise on The Nature Conservancy’s 231-acre Tom McCall Preserve. Photo © Michael Horodyski, 500px.com/mjhpdx
A reconveyance means a land trust owns the land or easement temporarily, with the property eventually transferred to another entity, such as a public agency or nonprofit partner.

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust that allows the landowner to permanently restrict how his or her property may be used.

A fee acquisition means a land trust owns a property outright, through donation or purchase, with the intent of long-term ownership and management.

TOGETHER WE’VE CONSERVED 344,073 ACRES

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS
188
61,421 ACRES

ACQUISITIONS
202
146,665 ACRES

RECONVEYANCES
221
135,987 ACRES

2015 PROGRESS
22 NEW CONSERVATION PROJECTS PROTECTING 15,163 ACRES


0 100k 200k 300k 400k

344,073 ACRES

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0 100k 200k 300k 400k

344,073 ACRES
Community gardens and land trusts don’t usually land in the same sentence. But after talking to Dale Cramer Burr, it’s hard to remember why not.

"Bringing the community in and engaging in this way has everything to do with being stewards of our land," she said.

Burr’s the executive director of the Lower Nehalem Community Trust, which owns more than 100 acres of conservation land along the Oregon coast. Their first project was Alder Creek Farm—an old dairy farm acquired by the trust in 2005. About 50 acres of the property are being restored for conservation, and the remaining four acres include community gardens.

"We approach active conservation in a slightly different way," she said. "We found we bring so many people to the heart of conservation—caring for the land—through community gardening." Alder Creek Farm’s community garden is managed by 40 local volunteers. There are those who attend to the ducks or heirloom apples or permaculture garden. The farm donates nearly a ton of food from the garden to the local food bank every year.

Their native plant nursery is also active, growing starts for restoration on the site and other coastal locations. There are natural areas, elk herds, and trails on the property—including a stop on the Oregon Coast Birding Trail. The trust holds a plant sale in the spring, harvest festival in the fall and, in the summer, they host a week-long summer camp for kids.

“We see 31 campers spending their days catching frogs, harvesting their lunch in the garden, laughing with each other and learning about ecology in this amazing outdoor classroom,” Burr said. “It’s magical.”

LEARN MORE | OregonLandTrusts.org/AlderCreek
Over pints of dark beer, Kevin Gorman unfurls a well-loved map of the Columbia Gorge and, with a paperclip, traces the green protected areas. It’s the spaces between the green he’s interested in.

As executive director of Friends of the Columbia Gorge Land Trust, Gorman has a vision of connected areas—a 170-mile loop trail that connects cities to hiking trails and local businesses. The Gorge Towns to Trails project, inspired by European hut-to-hut trekking, began in 2011 and has helped secure four parcels of land in Oregon and Washington, steadily building a connected corridor of green.

One such space, Mosier Plateau, is 45 acres that now links to a city-owned park. The land is currently used by dog walkers, hikers, and a local charter school for science and PE classes. On a sunny May afternoon, Gorman took the COLT board of directors to Mosier Plateau to show them this success story. Over burritos they looked at the numbers. Of three trail connections they are working on, 92% of the envisioned landscape is already conserved and protected public land; Gorman and the numerous partners will work to secure land and develop trails on the remaining 8%.

“This is not just a project about wildlands,” Gorman said. “It’s a project that embodies what the gorge is all about. There’s something wonderful about connecting a town not just to waterfalls, but to orchards, wineries, salmon runs and more.”

LEARN MORE | OregonLandTrusts.org/TownsToTrails

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– Kevin Gorman
Seven out of ten Oregonians live within 20 miles of the banks of the Willamette River.

The McKenzie River Trust (MRT) understands the importance of the river to Oregonians, and decided to undertake a massive restoration effort in the Willamette floodplain.

“It truly is a living river,” said Joe Moll, executive director of the McKenzie River Trust. “Not just for salmon and bald eagles and frogs, but for people too.”

The site of the project is the 1,100-acre Green Island north of Eugene. A series of three gravel ponds were left over after decades of mining where the Willamette and McKenzie rivers meet. For five years, MRT has worked to turn these pits—which isolated fish and wildlife—into a more natural landscape with half a mile of connected floodplain habitat.

“It’s already paying off,” Moll said. Without the restoration, ponds would remain detached. “Today, with heavy rains in winter, the ponds fill up and empty much more naturally.”

The change is good news for fish and other wildlife, which need seasonal flooding to connect the landscape back to the larger Willamette river system. And in turn, the restoration adds to the natural fluidity—and meander—of Oregon’s most populated river.

 ► LEARN MORE | OregonLandTrusts.org/GreenIsland
Dan Bell spent years planning, walking the banks and pouring over maps of the area. He knew it well. Until he didn’t.

“Pulling up to something so familiar—that I’ve seen hundreds of times—and finding myself disoriented because so much has shifted with the restoration was amazing,” he said. “It gave me goose bumps, in a good way, to be lost in a place I knew so well.”

In 2010, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) purchased 1,270 acres of property where the Middle and Coast forks of the Willamette River join, east of Eugene. Since then, Bell, the Willamette Basin conservation director for TNC, and staff have been restoring and reconnecting historic river channels.

The Willamette Confluence project has 14 ponds that were a result of area gravel mining—and several ponds have now been reconnected to the river. Work involved 3D mapping of the riverbed, engineering and transformation on the ground. Earth moving equipment sculpted the space, habitat log jams were brought in (downed trees make great habitat for young fish) and over 200,000 trees and shrubs were planted.

The first fish survey was a testament to the work—population numbers began to rise. With such positive response here and at the MRT property just downstream, Bell sees the organizations as mentors to other groups doing similar work around the globe. “The immediate and obvious impact to the space is impressive,” Bell said. “My old maps are maps for what’s now under water. And that’s a great feeling.”

LEARN MORE | OregonLandTrusts.org/WillametteConfluence
“Thanks to the support and vision of the community, the Board of Forestry, The Conservation Fund and others, we can celebrate the beginning of a great new era for these forests.”

— Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski

WORKING LANDS REBORN

“This was a labor of love,” said Evan Smith, senior vice president for conservation ventures with The Conservation Fund. Eight years ago, he and others started working on a plan to return an over-harvested timber stand to a more balanced working landscape. In 2010, the 48,000-acre Gilchrist Forest became Oregon’s first new state forest in more than 60 years.

Before that? The Eastern Oregon forest was managed with a light touch, until intense logging entered in the 1990s. Back then, whole stands were cleared and harvested, ending with the landowners filing bankruptcy. That’s when Smith stepped on the scene. The national nonprofit secured the property with the intent of transferring it to the state as a working landscape. It’s a young forest, which is expected given its rough past. Like the trees, the local timber economy will grow back, too. But the story wasn’t over in 2010. The Conservation Fund secured an additional 28,000 acres of adjoining forest land with the hope of adding to the Gilchrist Forest. In 2015, the final property was sold to the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), completing the multi-year conservation transaction.

“The Oregon Department of Forestry is the ideal manager of a property like this,” said Smith. The ODF will manage the land to provide long term benefits to wildlife habitat, timber jobs, recreation, and revenue to support local government services. Funding for the roughly $25 million project included federal Forest Legacy funds and state lottery revenue dollars. “The forest in northern Klamath County is slowly returning,” Smith said. “You can almost see the curve of the horizon from the viewpoint up there. It’s an important piece of the conservation landscape and an awesome achievement.”

LEARN MORE | OregonLandTrusts.org/GilchristForest
A FAMILY LEGACY

Forsted land arcing around the city of Springfield will now stay that way forever. “It's a heck of a lot better than the alternative,” said Hugh Gray. Gray’s great-great-grandfather—an explorer and scout for wagon trains—homesteaded the property more than 150 years ago. Here you’ll find timberland, prairie, and wildlife. Thanks to a voter-approved local ballot initiative in 2012, these woods and adjoining acres of iconic ridgeline now make up the 600-acre Thurston Hills Natural Area and Community Forest.

Getting to this point, however, required ingenuity. The Gray family—Hugh and his two sisters—had a park-like vision for their family’s land. “We literally couldn’t stand the thought of this becoming a development,” Hugh said. “A decision like that lasts forever.”

The local Willamalane Park and Recreation District was interested in working to conserve the land. But they didn’t have the resources. “I got this cold call from a farmer wanting to discuss protection of his family’s land,” said Owen Wozniak, project manager for The Trust For Public Land (TPL). “I checked it out and it’s amazing—a huge landscape connection that would fulfill a regional Rivers to Ridges conservation vision.” TPL enlisted their conservation finance team to work with Willamalane to help develop and pass the $20 million local bond measure. They then assisted in brokering a deal to purchase the Gray family’s homestead and adjacent lands, garnering support from Bonneville Power Administration and the US Forest Service.

Today, the 600 acres is owned by Willamalane. Plans for restoration and a community forest are under way. Thurston Hills will also provide walking, hiking, and mountain biking opportunities.

“To me, the real beneficiary is the community of Springfield which, in one fell swoop, got a park comparable to Portland’s Forest Park—in location and visibility,” said Wozniak. “You know, they just created their legacy.”

LEARN MORE | OregonLandTrusts.org/ThurstonHills

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BRIGHT FUTURE FOR DARK CANYON

For more than 100 years, Joe and Patti Cunha’s family worked this land running cattle. It’s a cursive landscape—streams and hills, salmon, and elk woven gracefully together on a working ranch along Dark Canyon Creek outside La Grande in Northeast Oregon.

In the fall of 2015, the Blue Mountain Land Trust (BMLT) completed their first major conservation project in Oregon, a conservation easement protecting nearly 3,000 acres of the Cunha ranch. The Dark Canyon conservation project will permanently exclude development and protect local fish and wildlife, all while keeping working lands intact.

The Cunha family and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation have mindfully balanced the needs of the land and their livelihood. “Everything the land trust wants for the property we want as landowners,” said Patti. The Cunhas had worked with the tribes and state wildlife managers to restore their land over the years, but the long-term protection was not guaranteed. After significant discussions and planning, the tribes contacted the BMLT to help develop a permanent conservation easement over the property. “Grazing is a cultural tradition and a lifestyle out here,” said Tom Reilly, the newly retired conservation director of BMLT. “It can be hard on the landscape, but that’s not the case with the Cunha Ranch. This ground has been worked for a long time, and it’s in really beautiful shape.” Partners include the Bonneville Power Administration, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, and the Cunha family themselves, who demonstrated their commitment by selling the easement under market value.

“I went out there with tribal staff in October, probably for the last time as an employee, for monitoring,” Reilly said. “Standing there, looking out, it felt good to be a part of something so magical.”

LEARN MORE | OregonLandTrusts.org/DarkCanyon

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The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) is a key partner in the conservation of Oregon’s natural resources. With the statewide passage of Measure 76 in 2010, a percentage of the state’s lottery revenues was permanently dedicated through OWEB to help Oregonians protect and restore healthy watersheds and natural habitats. To date, OWEB has awarded over $40 million in land acquisition grants that are leveraged multiple times over, protecting more than 60,000 acres throughout Oregon.

The work of land trusts is central to implementing the state’s conservation goals. Oregon’s investments in land acquisition have led to victories such as the Oregon chub in 2015 becoming the first fish in the nation to be delisted from the Endangered Species Act. These goals are accomplished through voluntary land conservation in partnership with private landowners, land trusts, watershed councils and soil and water conservation districts.

**A BIG YEAR FOR OREGON LANDS**

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GET INVOLVED

We encourage you to learn more and help spread the word. Here’s how:

**MEET**
your local land trust: attend an event, arrange a tour or stop in and meet the staff.

**EXPLORE**
our website and contact us with questions and ideas.

**SHARE**
what you’ve learned with landowners and leaders in your community.

Engage with COLT online:

- OREGONLANDTRUSTS.ORG
- @ORLANDTRUSTS
- FACEBOOK.COM/OREGONLANDTRUSTS

COALITION OF OREGON LAND TRUSTS

We work to increase awareness of and support for private land conservation in Oregon. Our community of 19 member land trusts came together to form COLT because they believe their individual messages are made stronger by unifying their efforts statewide. As the collective voice representing the interests of land trusts throughout Oregon, COLT is actively building relationships across the state that promote the undeniable value land trusts bring to each of our communities.

Land trusts are unique in their approach and long in their vision. By partnering with willing landowners who love and care for the land, they work collaboratively to ensure healthy habitats, balanced ecosystems, and productive working lands will endure for many generations yet to come.

TOGETHER. FOR OREGON’S LAND.