

Land Acquisition

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Introduction

Land acquisition was identified and discussed extensively (in its various forms, e.g. fee simple title, conservation easements, and long-term leases) as an aquatic and terrestrial habitat protection strategy in the subbasin plan development process. When the Washington portion of the draft Walla Walla Subbasin plan was being considered for approval by the Walla Walla Watershed Planning Unit (WA only), the Planning Unit was unable to reach consensus on inclusion of *fee simple title* land acquisition as a strategy. Hence, the strategy was deleted from the terrestrial and aquatic management plan sections, and majority and minority reports on the topic are provided in this Appendix. Conservation easements and long-term leases are supported aquatic and terrestrial strategies.

Majority Report (Against Inclusion of Fee Simple Title Land Acquisition Strategy)

This position reflects the views of a majority of the Washington Planning Unit, as defined in its bylaws.

Fee simple title land acquisition is viewed by local landowners as problematic in several ways.

- It has been suggested that public and tribal land managers often do not have the resources to maintain the land after acquisition, and so wildlife are attracted over time to more suitable habitat on private lands.
- Concerns have also been expressed about public agencies being able to pay more for lands than private landowners, as these properties are purchased with public resources (perceived as “deep taxpayer pockets”), and require no specific economic return to justify the expenditure.
- There is also a general perception that long-term negative economic impacts may result if additional lands are taken out of the tax base in these rural areas, which already have a significant percentage of land in public ownership.
- Economic impacts may also occur due to closure of small businesses that depend upon a strong agricultural economy. This may also require that existing agricultural producers need to travel farther for the services they require.
- Land acquisition may “lock up” land and remove flexibility for its future management or use.

Based upon these concerns, the majority opposed use of Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) funding for fee simple title purchase of land by public and tribal agencies. The majority strongly supports long-term protection of lands through land conservation easements and/or lease programs. Conservation easements and long-term leases are viewed as a more economical and precise way to protect critical resource lands because the agency doesn't have to purchase an entire parcel (which may include highly

disturbed lands along with higher quality habitat), but rather can work with a land owner to place critical habitat lands in conservation easement. Landowner agreements can also be established for a desired level of management.

Minority Report (For Inclusion of Fee Simple Title Land Acquisition Strategy)

This position reflects the views of a minority of the Washington Planning Unit, as defined in its bylaws.

Fee simple title land acquisition can be an effective strategy for providing connectivity (linking blocks of habitat), protecting investments in habitat restoration, and providing long-term protection of important habitat areas from land development and other land use impacts. Both WDFW and tribal agencies have used land acquisition to protect large sections of habitat in Southeastern Washington. This acquired land, combined with existing public lands primarily owned and managed by the USFS, has resulted in permanent habitat for both terrestrial and aquatic species, including habitat for all of the aquatic and terrestrial focal species.

Additionally, some landowner representatives have expressed a desire not to preclude this as an option for those potentially interested in selling private property in the future.

The minority would support establishing terms and conditions regarding land acquisition to provide greater clarity on when and how this tool would be used, to reduce or allay concerns expressed by the majority. Some terms and conditions discussed include:

- Willing seller and buyer, with purchase price based upon assessed market value;
- Providing land management funding for maintaining acquired property;
- Require payment-in-lieu of taxes to local governments; and
- Require local public involvement (notifications, public meetings, opportunity for comment) regarding the property being considered for purchase, and County Commissioner support of acquisition prior to proceeding with purchase

Furthermore, economic impacts of fee simple acquisitions can be minimized by: 1) payroll for management of the acquired lands staying in the local economy, 2) supplies and materials needed for management being acquired locally, and 3) uses of the property providing economic benefits related to a healthy ecosystem and uses thereof (recreation, cleaner air and water, stabilization of flows, reduction of sediment runoff, etc).

The minority strongly supports use of Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) funding for fee simple title purchase of land by public and tribal agencies as an important long-term protection strategy.