

The northern red-legged frog will benefit from a \$23.5 million deal—the Conservancy's largest ever in Oregon.



Conserving the Confluence

Protecting an Unparalleled Property in Oregon

PROTECTING 1,270 ACRES AT THE confluence of the Middle and Coast forks of the Willamette River in Oregon has been a conservation priority for decades, but it took an unlikely alliance to finally accomplish it. Last year, The Nature Conservancy teamed up with a federal electricity agency and a state conservation board to purchase the coveted parcel of wetlands and oak woodlands from Wildish Land Co., a family-owned sand and gravel and construction business.

Nearly 200 miles before emptying into the Columbia River at Portland, the Willamette's tributaries converge near

the city of Eugene. Known as the Willamette Confluence, the area is an ecological crossroads where waters, wetlands, prairies and forests come together. The new preserve protects six miles along the Willamette and will help support threatened Chinook salmon and Oregon chub, as well as the northern red-legged frog.

The \$23.5 million deal—the largest ever for the Conservancy in Oregon—will help connect local and state parkland to create a 4,700-acre corridor for wildlife. “There is no other property like this left in the Willamette Valley,” says Russell Hoeflich, who directs the

A new 1,270-acre Conservancy purchase will protect the extensive wetlands and dense forests surrounding the confluence of the Middle and Coast forks of the Willamette River.

Oregon program.

The Wildish company had mined gravel along some riverbanks, which will require a complicated restoration effort. The plan is to remove most of the levees and man-made channels and allow the river to flow across its historical floodplain. On the remainder of the property, which is largely untouched, workers will root out invasive

species and use controlled burns to restore remnant prairies and woodlands. Managing such a large area for conservation is an opportunity to rethink river and dam management on the upper Willamette River, says Dan Bell, the Conservancy's Willamette Basin conservation director. A reconnected floodplain will absorb floodwaters, allowing upstream dam operators to restore more natural river flows without affecting landowners downstream.

The majority of money for the purchase came from Bonneville Power Administration funds allocated to offsetting the effects of federal dams on wildlife habitat. The Conservancy received an additional \$2.5 million from lottery funds dedicated to wildlife habitat.

The protection of the Willamette Confluence is the culmination of a conservation dream first envisioned in 1971 by Gov. Tom McCall, who proposed a regional park around Mount Pisgah that included the Wildish property. The Wildish family has always appreciated the natural and recreational value of the land but had hesitated to sell 750 acres of hard-to-find land zoned for gravel extraction, says company vice-president Steve Wildish.

—Jane Braxton Little