



Oregon

Tina Kotek, Governor

Department of Fish and Wildlife

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May 17, 2023

Senator Michael Dembrow, Co-Chair
Representative Khanh Pham, Co-Chair
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Natural Resources
900 Court Street NE
Room H-178
Salem, OR 97301



Dear Co-Chairs:

Thank you for the opportunity on May 11th to provide a progress report on the acquisition of the Disaster Peak Ranch property in Malheur County by Western Rivers Conservancy and present an overview of the request for federal fund and other funds limitation related to the project.

During the hearing Representative Holvey asked a question regarding the streams on Disaster Peak Ranch and their overall impact on the 55 miles of habitat supporting Lahontan cutthroat trout. In 2019, Western Rivers Conservancy developed a summary document describing their planned acquisition of the ranch and the importance of the landscape for fish and wildlife. I included the document with this letter to better explain the project and the habitat in the McDermitt Creek basin.

I've also included a link to the project description on their website which they keep updated,
<https://www.westernrivers.org/projects/or/mcdermitt-creek>

Sincerely,

Shannon M. Hurn
Deputy Director for Administration
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

McDERMITT CREEK

Conserving Critical Sage Grouse Habitat in the Great Basin
Malheur County, Oregon & Humboldt County, Nevada



WESTERN RIVERS
CONSERVANCY

6.19

The Great Basin ecoregion of southeastern Oregon and northern Nevada is a stunning expanse of isolated mountain ranges separated by flat, high-desert basins. Sparsely populated and marked by extreme weather and aridity, the region sustains some of the best remaining sagebrush habitat in the West. The iconic sagebrush-steppe once covered 165 million acres across the western United States and Canada. Today, less than 10 percent of that habitat remains unspoiled. As a result, more than 350 plant and animal species are at risk of local or regional extirpation, including the greater sage grouse, a charismatic bird that represents healthy sagebrush grasslands.



Western Rivers Conservancy is working to acquire the Disaster Peak Ranch, a 3,345-acre cattle ranch near the tiny border town of McDermitt, Oregon. In a landscape dominated by the Sheldon-Hart Mountain National Wildlife

Refuge Complex to the west, the rugged Steens Mountain Wilderness to the north, and the Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Wilderness and National Conservation Area to the south, Disaster Peak Ranch is uniquely important. At the heart of the property runs McDermitt Creek, a perennial source of cold, clean water flowing through a sea of sagebrush.

Disaster Peak Ranch boasts nearly 15 miles of McDermitt Creek and several key tributaries. Surrounded on all sides by BLM land, including seven BLM-managed Wilderness Study Areas, the ranch and its surrounding landscape support numerous fish and wildlife species, including Lahontan cutthroat trout, greater sage grouse, Columbia spotted frog, pygmy rabbit, mule deer, California bighorn sheep, elk, bobcat, great horned owl, coyote, cougar, raccoon, muskrat, beaver, golden eagle and sandhill cranes.

McDermitt Creek and the Trout Creek Mountains have been identified as both a sage grouse stronghold and Priority Area of Conservation by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the highest level of protection the bird is currently afforded. McDermitt Creek also offers the best opportunity to restore one of the West's most threatened fish species, Lahontan cutthroat trout. Western Rivers' acquisition would allow for restoration and reintroduction efforts that have the potential to connect 55 stream miles of Lahontan cutthroat trout habitat, doubling the existing occupied habitat for the species in the northwest part of its range, while also improving the riparian habitat sage grouse depend upon. In an increasingly fragmented and disturbed landscape, conservation opportunities like this are rare.



Greater sage grouse (left) depend on McDermitt Creek's riparian habitat (shown above) for foraging, brood rearing, and cover.

Project Facts:

Project Size:	3,345 deeded acres (2,690 OR; 655 NV) 7,342 AUM grazing allotment (53,218 acres of BLM)
Stream Miles:	15 miles on McDermitt, Sage, and Riser Creeks
Species:	Lahontan cutthroat trout (Threatened) Greater sage grouse (Candidate) Columbia spotted frog (Candidate) Pygmy rabbit (NV Priority Species)
Estimated Value:	\$4,500,000

For more information, please contact:

Sue Doroff, President

Western Rivers Conservancy

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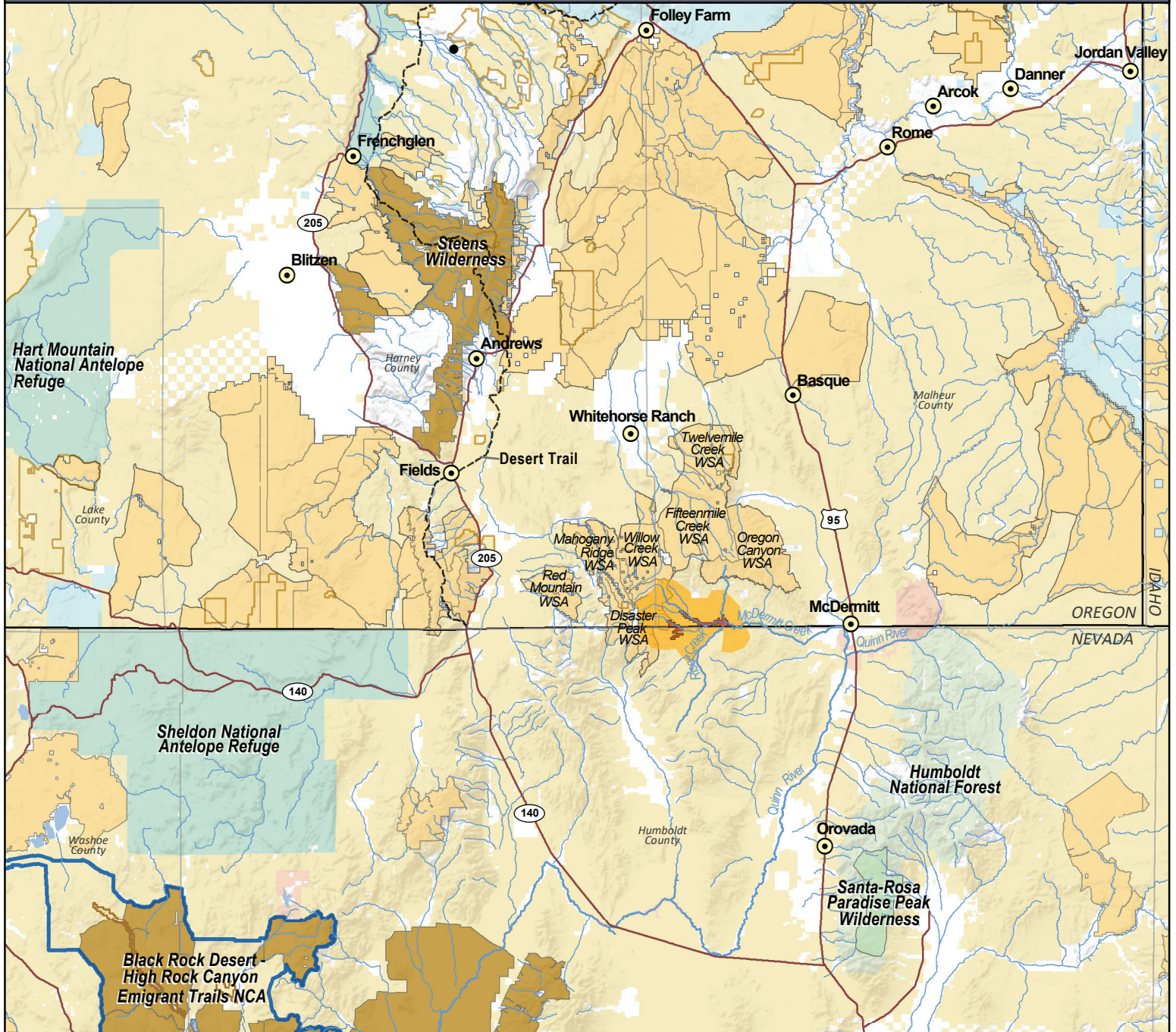
McDermitt Creek

Conserving Critical Sage Grouse Habitat in the Great Basin

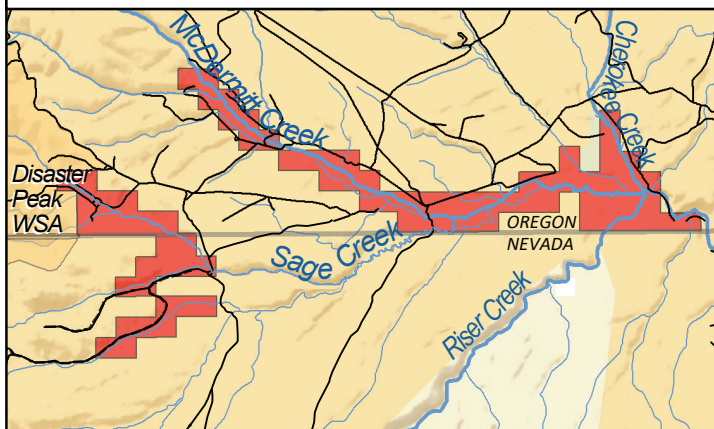
Malheur County, Oregon & Humboldt County, Nevada



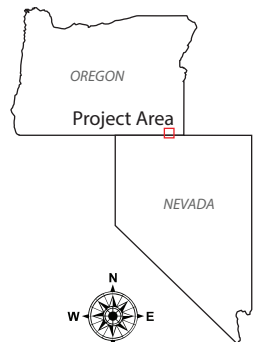
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Project Map Inset



- Zimmerman Ranch (3,345 acres)
- BLM Grazing Lease (7,342 AUMs)
- Bureau of Land Management
- US Fish & Wildlife Service
- US Forest Service
- State Lands
- Wilderness Areas (BLM)
- Wilderness Study Area (BLM)
- Wilderness Areas (USFS)
- Area of Critical Environmental Concern
- National Conservation Area
- Trails
- County boundary
- Highways
- Local roads (see inset)



0 20 40 Miles