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BLM and Western Rivers Conservancy Conserve Stretch of Oregon's Wild and Scenic John Day River and Secure New Recreational Access

CONDON, OR – At the heart of the John Day Wild and Scenic River corridor, Western Rivers Conservancy and the Bureau of Land Management have created new overland recreational access to 78,000 acres of public lands in a landmark conservation project that will benefit fish, wildlife, recreationists and the communities of Oregon's John Day River.

On August 20th, Western Rivers Conservancy completed the conveyance of two ranches to the BLM, which will now manage all 11,154 acres of the properties as public open space. This will enable hunters, anglers, boaters, hikers and other recreationists to explore a spectacular slice of Oregon that was formerly inaccessible without trespassing or without a boat. Of these lands, 2,000 acres of existing public lands were completely cut off to the public by private property.

“This is a landmark achievement for the John Day River and recreationists alike,” said Sue Doroff, President of Western Rivers Conservancy. “People can now experience a spectacular stretch of one of the West’s great Wild and Scenic River corridors. At the same time, they can take pride in knowing that the lands they’re exploring are protected for fish and wildlife—animals they will very likely see while visiting this special place.”

“Managing public lands for the benefit of all Americans requires collaboration among private landowners, conservation and recreation groups, and local, state, tribal, and federal governments,” said Brian Steed, BLM Deputy Director for Policy and Programs. “This

acquisition along the John Day River shows the importance of public lands to western communities and our commitment to being a good neighbor.”

The John Day River is home to the healthiest run of wild summer steelhead in the Columbia River basin and to one of the basin’s most important runs of wild Chinook salmon. It also flows through the heart of bighorn sheep country, supporting over 600 head, the largest herd in Oregon.

The project lands are located on Thirtymile Creek, the lower John Day’s most important spawning and rearing tributary for summer steelhead and the lower river’s largest source of cold water.

The lands now provide the only public access to a 70-mile reach of the John Day River canyon in an area with more public land than most other stretches of the river. Until this week, however, the only public access to these lands was by boat, which required a four-day float from Clarno Bridge to Cottonwood Canyon, downstream.

The former landowners allowed access to the river for a fee, and the partners’ efforts will ensure this access remains viable for all recreationists. Had the ranch sold to a different buyer, that access could have been closed forever.

The Thirtymile Wilderness Study Area lies immediately upstream of the ranch, and the North Pole Ridge Wilderness Study Area lies immediately downstream. Both are managed by the BLM for public use and to preserve their natural conditions, similar to but distinct from federally designated wilderness areas.

The project also promises to be an economic boon to nearby communities like Condon, Oregon, where recreationists will stop for gas, lodging and/or supplies when visiting the area.

Western Rivers Conservancy purchased the ranches from the Rattray and Campbell families in 2014 and 2018, respectively, and spent four years raising the funds needed for the BLM to acquire the lands from WRC.

Funding for the project came from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which was created by Congress in 1965 as a bipartisan commitment to safeguard natural areas, water resources and cultural sites, and to provide recreation opportunities to all Americans. Funded primarily by federal revenues from offshore oil and gas development, LWCF supports the protection of federal public lands and waters and voluntary conservation on private land.

LWCF is a program of the U.S. Department of the Interior, and support from Interior Secretary David Bernhardt and his staff has been pivotal to the success of this project.

WRC President Sue Doroff praised BLM “for funding a key land acquisition that opens up access for anglers and hunters to 78,000 acres of public lands along the John Day River.”

LWCF support was also made possible thanks to Senator Jeff Merkley, Senator Ron Wyden and the Oregon Congressional Delegation.

Now that the properties are under BLM ownership, they will be managed for conservation and recreation, with special attention given to maintaining healthy habitat for the John Day River's outstanding fish and wildlife. The project will enable restoration of the lower nine miles of Thirtymile Creek, while protecting 10 miles of the John Day River and thousands of acres of sagebrush-steppe habitat.

The project also keeps an additional 4,437 acres of upland agricultural fields in production. By exploring agriculture and grazing programs with neighboring landowners, the BLM and Western Rivers Conservancy can ensure these lands remain an asset to the community in addition to the economic benefits that come with public recreation.

WRC's efforts at Thirtymile Creek build on the organization's recent success downstream, at Cottonwood Canyon State Park. WRC created the park in partnership with Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, conserving 16 miles of the John Day, three miles of another important tributary and 16,000 acres of land. The wild and scenic river corridor running the length of the park is co-managed by the BLM and OPRD, which is a unique federal and state agency partnership.

"The John Day River area is one of the last great expanses of sagebrush-steppe left on the Columbia Plateau," said Doroff. "We are proud of playing this role in protecting another significant slice of this disappearing landscape. Together with the BLM, we are helping guarantee that generations of future recreationists from the community, from Oregon and from across the country have the opportunity to experience this beautiful slice of the West and the river that sustains it."

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