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FROM POSTAGE STAMP TO PUZZLE PIECE: CONSERVATION EASEMENT STRATEGY IN THE INTERIOR NORTHWEST

AUTUMN ELLISON AND CASSANDRA MOSELEY

Conservation easements provide a way to permanently commit private land to uses that support ecosystem health. In recent years, both the number of land trusts and the amount of land put into easements has increased greatly. However, easements have been criticized as a piece-meal approach to conservation, with little value to real conservation goals if isolated and surrounded by other land uses. To better understand the ecological value of easements, we examined how land trusts and other organizations are using conservation easements to enhance ecosystems and ecosystem services across the West.

Approach

We conducted over 130 interviews in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana with landowners and staff from nonprofit organizations, land trusts, and government agencies. We asked about conservation projects, goals, and strategies. The land trusts interviewed varied in size from local to international organizations.

Results

Contrary to criticisms of easements as being piece-meal, we found that land trusts across the west make conservation easements as part of long-term and large-scale conservation strategies. We found many examples of the following themes in strategies for conservation easements across the West:

Landscape-scale conservation

Conservation easements are often part of larger regional conservation objectives. We found that land trusts used easements to link and expand existing conservation areas, or as anchors of permanently reserved land to build restoration and additional conservation around in high-priority ecosystems. For example, in Deschutes County, Oregon, a 34-mile reach of the Whychus Creek is a high-priority area for riparian protection and steelhead reintroduction. Collaborators use a wide variety of strategies in this area, including conservation easements, to develop an integrated conservation strategy. Local watershed councils help landowners along the reach with restoration projects, and the Deschutes River Conservancy, a local nonprofit, leases water rights to regain flow in the once-dry creekbed. Some 24.5 miles of the reach have federal protection. To link and expand these sections, the Deschutes Land Trust acquired conservation easements on three parcels totaling 3.5 miles. The easements in this landscape play an integral role in connecting protected sections, and contribute to the ecological goals of a much larger area.

Partnerships and collaboration

The ecological strategies of many land trusts require cooperation and collaboration between many partners to make gains that are beyond the ability of any one organization alone. Easements often require complicated land transfers and coordination

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between landowners, government agencies, local community groups, other land trusts, and other organizations. These transfers require innovative thinking and proficiency in real estate, conservation program, and legal regulations.

Diverse funding sources

Land trusts leverage funding from a variety of conservation and restoration programs to multiply the ecological gains from easements. In many cases easements depended on funding from Farm Bill and endangered species mitigation programs. Without this assistance, many easements would not be feasible at all. In other cases, funding from government agencies and regulatory obligations expanded or enhanced the objectives of easements.

Implications

Land trusts in the West are contributing to large-scale conservation and restoration that reaches far beyond the individual parcels placed in easements. We found many examples of organizations and collaborations using easements as part of a strategic conservation strategy in landscapes with high ecological importance. In conjunction with other conservation programs, partners, and funding, they work to maximize the gains from ecosystem services across the West.

More information

A description of the project, briefing papers, and fact sheets with examples of projects on the ground can be found on the project website at: **www.tinyurl.com/SNWEcosystemServices.**

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