



ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CONSERVATION EASEMENTS THROUGH TRUST BUILDING, PARTNER COORDINATION, AND COOPERATION

FACT SHEET SIX • SPRING 2013

This fact sheet series highlights innovative ways that family forest and ranch owners are prospering from protecting and enhancing ecosystem services on their land. Ecosystem services are the benefits people receive from nature such as water quality, wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestration.

Large, intact landscapes are necessary to maintain and enhance ecosystem services. Across the West, the break-up of working landscapes into “ranchettes” has resulted in the loss of fish and wildlife habitat, water quality, and other ecosystem services. In some landscapes, conservation easements have prevented this kind of development through the acquisition of development rights and deed restrictions specifying allowable land use activities. Although easements have protected numerous individual properties and have helped landowners address financial challenges, there is a growing perception that a lack of coordinated action at scale can limit their ecological effectiveness.

Two examples of a more coordinated approach to protecting and restoring land across landscapes with conservation easements are unfolding in the Blackfoot Watershed of western Montana and the Upper Salmon River Basin of north central Idaho. In both of these places, diverse groups are convening to facilitate the strategic use of easements while also maintaining agricultural and forestry land uses.

PARTNERS

The Blackfoot Challenge is a partnership of private landowners, public agencies, and non-profits focused on conserving and enhancing natural resources and rural livelihoods in the Blackfoot watershed of western Montana. The Upper Salmon Basin Watershed Program, based in Salmon, Idaho, is a state run, federally funded entity housed in the Governor’s Office of Species Conservation with a mission to protect and restore the region’s significant fish habitats through a partnership approach. Both groups work with stakeholders, land trusts, and landowners in their respective areas to address private land conservation strategically.

THE PROGRAMS

The Blackfoot Challenge facilitates and funds a Conservation Strategies Committee (CSC) to coordinate easement activity across the Blackfoot Valley. The group discusses current and planned easements and plays a matchmaking role to choose the best holder for a particular property and landowner (e.g., a land trust or a federal agency), helping them coordinate their outreach efforts. For example, a landowner with wildlife habitat who is



open to allowing public access may fit well with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, which requires public access on easements. The CSC has also developed a conservation easement working group that provides a venue for participants to discuss easement structure, tactics for management flexibility, third party easements, legal requirements, and other issues such as managing easements held by multiple entities.

In the Salmon River Basin, the Upper Salmon Basin Watershed Program coordinates a Technical Team of diverse players that evaluates and proposes a wide variety of restoration projects in the area such as conservation easements, fish screen installations, culvert removals, in-stream channel restoration, flood plain connectivity, and stream reconnections. The 'Tech Team' is made up of local ranchers, resource managers, agency personnel, and non-profit organizations. The Tech Team has a conservation easement working group of easement holders that coordinates and leverages individual efforts and prioritizes easements based on available funding, landowner willingness, and the ecological benefits of a particular project. Participants problem-solve around funding and implementation of easements, think strategically about future easements, and align their resources to knit together projects for conservation impacts at greater scales.

Both working groups depend on local involvement and efforts to build the landowner relationships necessary to foster landscape scale impact. Local intermediaries like the Blackfoot Challenge and, in the Upper Salmon Basin, Lemhi Regional Land Trust, put significant time and energy into building trust and maintaining accountability within their rural communities. These groups engage in landowner-to-landowner outreach and benefit from strong landowner leadership on their Boards of Directors, which often include easement holders themselves.

OUTCOMES

In these two cases, investment in coordination-through working groups—is resulting in increased and better restoration and protection of ecosystem services like water quality and habitat. Easement working groups save parties time and resources: agencies and land trusts can focus their programs appropriately, available funding can be strategically invested, and landowners are not overwhelmed by outreach from multiple entities looking to put land under easement.

Landowners benefit from the increased investment in easements in many ways. For some landowners, protecting high quality fish and wildlife habitat on their property is paramount; for others, the revenue or tax deduction from selling or donating an easement helps them to keep their land in both the short- and long-term.

While working groups foster many critical elements for success, easements also require the work of local intermediaries to build the trust, shared knowledge, and capacity to implement projects on the ground. The number of easements completed and requests received in each

valley is a testament to the success of this approach to engaging and forging relationships among landowners, agency staff, and other non-profits in the region.

CHALLENGES

Funding sources for easements can be a limiting factor. There is high landowner interest in conservation easements on the mainstem of the Salmon River, but two of the primary funding sources in the Basin only invest in reaches with spawning areas for endangered fish. Other federal sources like the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program have high cash match requirements that can be difficult for small land trusts in rural areas to secure.

Often, limited time and resources are barriers for landowners to participate in the working groups. As one working group member in the Blackfoot noted: "We'd like to get more landowner participation. We get some. But it's tough sometimes... people are working. The organizations are paid to be there, so they show up."

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The frameworks established by the working groups in the Blackfoot and Upper Salmon watersheds have been very effective in those landscapes and have led to conservation easements that hold value at both landowner and landscape scales.

These examples of working groups increasing coordination between easement holders and other intermediaries to promote private lands conservation may provide guidance in other watersheds where stakeholders are looking to secure strategic easements at multiple scales.

LEARN MORE

Blackfoot Challenge: <http://blackfootchallenge.org>

Upper Salmon Watershed Program: <http://modelwatershed.org/>

Lemhi Regional Land Trust: <http://www.lemhilandtrust.org/>

For more information about the project and to read the full fact sheet series, go to:

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