

Conservation SHOWCASE



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Saving Oregon's Oak Woodlands: A Collaborative Necessity

The richest and most diverse terrestrial ecosystems in Oregon are disappearing – oak woodlands and savannahs. Since the arrival of settlers in the early 1800s, more than 90 percent of Oregon's pre-settlement oak habitats have been cleared to make way for farms, urban areas, and other development. The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and partner organizations are working with private landowners to help protect and restore precious remaining oak habitats.

In early November 2011, about 25 conservation specialists from various government agencies and non-profit organizations met just south of Ashland, Ore. in the Colestin Valley to tour oak restoration projects, share information, and learn more about the current conservation effort.

This area of the Klamath-Siskiyou region has the highest biodiversity of any place in Oregon and that is why we are working here," said David Ross, a biologist and Partners for Fish and Wildlife coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "There are a whole host of organisms that if you took these oaks away, that community would disappear. Oregon oak woodlands are the most important terrestrial ecosystems in the Pacific Northwest – it is that important."

This collaborative project is part of an NRCS-funded Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI). With multiple partners, the Central Umpqua-Mid Klamath Oak Habitat

Conservation Project is providing technical and financial assistance directly to eligible landowners in the project area that stretches from Douglas and Jackson Counties in Oregon and into Siskiyou County, California.

“We’ve operated our oak restoration program for the past nine years,” said Marko Bey, Co-director of the Lomakatsi Restoration Project, who is the CCPI sponsor for this project. “We’re a bridge organization – we help bring together technical resources, funding and private landowners to make the work happen. Collaborative conservation is very successful in leveraging resources and expertise. It has been a very successful method for working with producers and putting the restoration of oak habitat on the ground.”

According to various studies, over 200 species of wildlife use oak habitat during their life cycle, including the acorn woodpecker, the oak

titmouse, Lewis’s woodpecker and the Columbian white-tailed deer. Currently, 45 oak-associated area species are considered ‘at-risk’ by various organizations.

With Lomakatsi taking the lead in coordination, NRCS’ CCPI has really presented a unique opportunity to work with our partners who each bring different skill sets to the table,” said Erin Kurtz, NRCS District Conservationist for Jackson County. “The collaboration has really enabled us to do projects that wouldn’t have otherwise been able to occur.”

In addition to the non-profit Lomakatsi, key partners in this project include the Klamath Bird Observatory, a non-profit organization that provides ecological research and monitoring to inform and enable land managers to manage more sustainable ecosystems; and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NRCS that both provide financial and technical assistance.

Klamath Tribe fire crew member inspects his chainsaw



Oak woodlands are distributed across both federal and private land. It is going to take collaboration between federal agencies and private landowners to do the landscape scale kind of conservation that is needed,” said John Alexander, Executive Director of the Klamath Bird Observatory. “This CCPI project is an example of how we can group together a full bio-regional conservation approach to identifying private lands where conservation can happen and then work collectively on those lands to have a relevant conservation impact.”

As outlined in the CCPI project proposal by Lomakatsi, the project’s three main objectives are to curtail the decline of oak associated plant communities by reducing existing threats; protect and promote the development of habitat for oak-associated wildlife; and improve watershed health and function in the project area. Working with multiple landowners through a cost-share approach, the project team plans to reach these objectives using several practices including thinning, prescribed fire, and woody biomass removal to reduce encroaching vegetation and stem densities within young oak stands, as well as weed control, and native grass seeding.

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—Marko Bey
Lomakatsi Restoration Project Co-director



John Alexander (center), Executive Director of the Klamath Bird Observatory, David Ross (left), a biologist and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Lee Winslow, with the Oregon Dept. of Forestry, look out over a recently renovated oak woodland project in the Colestin Valley located south of Ashland, Ore. in Nov. 2011.

“By reducing the density of oak stands, we address fuel loads and uncharacteristic wildfire potential,” said Bey. “This really helps reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire danger that threatens both wildlife habitat and personal property.”

Other benefits to participating landowners include increased aesthetic value by having open oak woodland in place of a dense tangle of encroaching, invasive vegetation; improved conservation value by providing habitat for wildlife; and additional grazing lands for cattle operations. These improvements also affect adjacent property and the entire community by improving watershed function, decreasing catastrophic wildfire risk in the area, and bringing in more wildlife to the area.

“We also have many subcontractors,” said Bey. “So there are employment and work opportunities

for making a living in a challenging economy like we have now. There are quite a few people employed on this CCPI. It's helping people feed their families.”

The Central Umpqua-Mid Klamath Oak Habitat Conservation CCPI estimates that just over \$1.8 million of funding is required to restore the goal of 2,000 acres of oak habitat over the next three years. Through CCPI, NRCS provided \$446,000 in funding in 2011 with the balance of the award still to be announced and allocated for the next two years. The project also leveraged an additional million dollars of funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to assist with project administration, planning and implementation.

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Lomakatsi oak restoration operations. Josh Budziak, (left) Contract Operations Manager for the Lomakatsi Restoration Project, describes the ecologically based commercial thinning and controlled burn operations to guests at an oak restoration project in southern Jackson County, Ore. on Nov. 3, 2011.

