

Conservation Planning....

By Allison Lutz

North Olympic Land Trust has had great success over the last 18 years working with willing landowners to protect Clallam County's significant ecological resources, locally important agricultural economies and culturally rich landscapes. We accomplish our work primarily through conservation easements, legal agreements that eliminate much of a property's development potential which are upheld in perpetuity. In some cases, the Land Trust will acquire or accept donations of land.

With a service area encompassing 2,670 square miles of land and water, you may wonder how we go about selecting important land conservation projects. Like the wildlife we aim to protect, we thrive on opportunity. We respond first to requests for conservation easements from individual landowners, and then evaluate the property and its conservation values using our established criteria and ranking system. The outcome of this approach speaks volumes about the generosity and conservation ethic of local landowners we've worked with over the years; their collective legacy totals over 1,400 acres of precious land, protected forever for the benefit of all species.

Despite these successes, the opportunistic approach has its drawbacks. Conservation easement properties are mostly scattered across the county. Fragmentation is already a problem on the Olympic Peninsula. Protected lands will resemble isolated islands unless we become more proactive about creating larger, contiguous tracts that provide superior ecological benefits. Large scale conservation is beginning to happen in the lower Dungeness through partnerships with private landowners, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Ducks Unlimited, Friends of the Fields, PCC Farmland Trust, and North Olympic Land Trust. This kind of collaboration demonstrates how landscape scale projects can also happen in other areas if there is a common vision and the right momentum.

This has prompted North Olympic Land Trust to begin a process in that identifies, prioritizes, pursues and protects those specific tracts of land that will most effectively achieve our mission and conservation objectives. This process, adopted by land trusts nationwide, is called Strategic Conservation Planning. How

wonderful it would be if the Land Trust had the staff and financial resources to protect all the wild and rural places in Clallam County. The reality, like most nonprofits, is limited capacity so I believe we have an ethical obligation to protect the best first. Conservation planning will help us develop criteria to determine what lands are the “best”.

Last summer, our intern from Peninsula College’s ‘Huxley on the Peninsula’ program, Keri Hevner started the process by researching other conservation plans that are relevant to our region. We don’t want to reinvent the wheel but rather synthesize and help implement the good recommendations already out there. Jefferson Land Trust has already started a strategic conservation planning process for East Jefferson County. We plan to use the same methodology so that our plans can be combined into an Olympic wide conservation strategy by 2010 at the earliest. If you are interested volunteering your time to help the Land Trust with its strategic conservation planning, please contact Allison Lutz, Conservation Director, at 417-1815 or allison@nolt.org.

In the meantime, and for generations to come, we will continue to seize good opportunities so if you are a landowner interested in donating a conservation easement, or know of someone with land that they love and want to see protected forever, please call the Land Trust today.