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In a Divided Time, Oregon's Land Trusts Conserve Common Ground

By Shelby Oppel Wood

TROUT CREEK RANCH, Ore. — In dry, remote Southeast Oregon, hard against the Nevada border, two sets of stream-threaded mountains bracket a low, arid valley. Here in southern Harney County, people are few, wildlife is abundant, the sky is a boundless blue dome, and the scale of everything is eye-popping.

This is where you'll find [Trout Creek Ranch](#), a conservation area of 17,000 private acres scattered across 500,000 acres of public lands — a vast expanse 2½ times the size of Crater Lake National Park.

The ranch appears peaceful: mile after mile of aspen woodlands, grasslands, wet meadows and sagebrush steppe, set among the Trout Creek and Pueblo Mountains. But this corner of Oregon's sweeping high desert region ripples with activity: ranchers and their grazing cattle; local Tribes who have stewarded this land for millennia; pronghorn antelope, birds and fish that migrate through its meadows, skies and streams.

Today, the [Oregon Desert Land Trust \(ODLT\)](#) manages this hard-working land so that it can continue to support the people, wildlife and climate that rely on it. The trust owns the private lands of Trout Creek Ranch and holds grazing privileges on the surrounding public acres.

Oregon is home to more than 20 nonprofit land trusts like ODLT, rooted in rural and urban communities from the Pacific Coast to the Idaho border. Their conservation mission makes them broadly popular in Oregon, with support from Oregonians of starkly different backgrounds and politics. Oregon Community Foundation supports this work through a partnership with the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts and Land Trust Alliance called the [Oregon Lands and People Project](#).

"I think people see land trusts as an opportunity to get things done despite the larger divisions in our country or across the state," says Brent Fenty, ODLT's Executive Director. "We, along with our partners, are really focused on what we can do together. It gives me hope to see folks creating this common ground, focusing on

things that contribute to healthy communities and a healthy environment, which are values that all of us share.”

Land trusts operate on a simple premise: They purchase or accept donation of important natural areas from owners who want the land to remain undeveloped. In some cases, sellers are farmers and ranchers who want to ensure their property remains locally-owned, working land. Owners who donate to land trusts can also benefit from tax breaks.

The collective capacity of Oregon land trusts got supercharged in 2012 by a ten-year, [\\$10 million investment](#) by the John Gray family. Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) donors have supported land trusts for decades, and recent OCF Impact Fund investments are helping these nonprofit organizations access bridge funding and low-cost capital to move more quickly to acquire properties that have significant ecological and community benefits.

With Oregon facing threats from wildfire, biodiversity loss and other impacts of a changing climate, the state’s land trusts are poised in 2025 to accelerate their work — and just maybe, to protect for future generations the forests, farms, deserts, wetlands, rivers and coast that make Oregon, Oregon.

Partnership Brings Breathing Room

Even amid the wide-open spaces of Southeast Oregon, it can feel awfully constricting to rancher Hollie Henricks and her husband Ty, whose 1,020-acre [Cottonwood Ranch](#) abuts ODLT land near the town of Fields. The Henricks’ several hundred cattle need a lot of space to move and graze.

So when Fenty suggested the Henricks enter a lease with ODLT that would enable their cows to graze across thousands of acres of public land for which ODLT holds the grazing permits, the couple took him up on the offer.

For the Henrickses, the partnership means their cattle have access to more ground and to cooler, greener reaches of the Trout Creek Mountains — especially important for cows raised in the desert.

Working with ODLT “has given our ranch so much flexibility in the way we graze our own place. Where everything was really tight before — you’ve got to be in this field, now you’ve got to be out of this field — now we have some breathing room, and just a ton of opportunity to make some changes,” Hollie says.

In classes and conversations with ODLT land managers, the Henrickses have learned about grazing methods that lead to more lush meadows; new grass seed varieties that can better tolerate the dry climate; and technological tools to help them track and monitor their cows.

“With them being here, it has given us some different perspectives on what we’re doing and how we could improve upon it,” Hollie says. “It just hasn’t been anything but good for us, and for our animals, too.”

It's these partnerships with ranchers — as well as Tribes and state and federal land managers — that have enabled ODLT to protect critical habitat for fish and wildlife throughout the high desert by conserving 20,000 acres of wild and working lands since 2017.

“We want to provide excellent stewardship of the lands we own and manage. The only way we can do that is by having all of these partnerships, with people who really know and care about this landscape. They help us understand what mistakes have been made in the past and what people have learned, and then we try to build on those partnerships to create solutions to the challenges that are facing all of us,” Fenty says.

Day to day on Trout Creek Ranch, solutions include installing small dams in streams, akin to what a beaver would build, and nurturing new willows on stream banks, which help keep water on the landscape and vegetation return to barren areas; controlling invasive weeds that increase wildfire risk; replacing traditional fences that can trap and kill animals with wildlife-friendly barriers; and testing new approaches like virtual fencing that uses GPS collars to contain grazing cattle.

ODLT also hosts regular [Tribal gatherings](#) at Trout Creek Ranch to ensure that Tribal members have access and can share their stewardship knowledge with ranch managers and Tribal youth; provides free emergency responder training to community members, with help from The Roundhouse Foundation; and maintains equipment for and hosts regular meetings of the local [Rangeland Fire Protection Association \(RFPA\)](#). Andy Gray, ODLT's ranch manager at Trout Creek, was recently elected RFPA president.

“It's important to us to be good neighbors,” says Fenty, who grew up in rural Deschutes County, works out of Bend, and travels frequently throughout the high desert. “There are a lot of different ways that the lands we own are showing up to contribute to this area's community, ecological and economic health.”

Coming Together to Avoid Natural Resource ‘Wars’

In a statewide survey of Oregon voters commissioned by the [Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts](#) (COLT) this spring, 90% of respondents agreed with the statement: “We all have a moral responsibility to protect natural areas and habitats for the plants, fish and wildlife that need them to survive.” The same survey found that 77% agreed that “having clean air and water and undeveloped open spaces are critical to keep Oregon's economy strong.”

Voter support for land trusts themselves transcended party lines, with four in five Democrats, nearly two-thirds of independents, and a slim majority of Republicans telling pollsters they approved of the organizations' work.

Such broad support belies the old nature narratives that have forced Oregonians to pick sides in “wars” over natural resources — timber wars, salmon wars — for decades, says Glenn Lamb, a founding board member and Executive Director of Columbia Land Trust for 32 years, who is now an advisor to COLT.

Land trusts excel at bringing people with disparate interests together around shared values, Lamb says. Their board members and employees live and work among their neighbors to conserve the places they all love and depend on, with the goal of ensuring everyone can benefit from wildlife and wild places, working farms and forests, recreation and parks, clean water, and a healthy climate, he says.

“As somebody who has witnessed that happen, I can tell you, we can change the world by doing this,” Lamb says. “We can break down these barriers that are false, that say we don't share common values.”

COLT and the national Land Trust Alliance, with OCF support, have embarked on a capital campaign to strengthen land trusts, expand the communities that they serve, and equip them with the tools and resources to protect Oregon's most vital lands and water. Goals include raising \$12 million in private dollars for conservation projects around the state and advocating to increase state funding for conservation.

“Oregon is seen as a leader in the national land trust movement. And a big part of that is because of the generosity of people who have invested in land trusts and moved us forward over the last 10 or 12 years,” says Jessica McDonald, Executive Director of [Greenbelt Land Trust](#). The community here is ready to lead on solutions to conservation questions, to build new avenues for breakthrough funding at a state level, and to move forward on complex conservation and restoration projects that can meet the demands of our rapidly changing climate.”

A Farm Becomes a Bridge

Benton County, on the opposite side of the state from Harney County, holds 13 times more people — and a lot fewer cows. The Willamette Valley basin is home to 70% of Oregon's population, but only 1% of its land is conserved, McDonald says.

Greenbelt is changing that, with projects like Owens Farm-Jackson Frazier Wetland, a natural area of nearly 500 green acres that straddles Highway 99 on the northern edge of Corvallis. Greenbelt, which owns part of the property, saw an opportunity to conserve its prairie, oak savanna and wetland habitats, which are quickly disappearing throughout the state.

Owens Farm also demonstrates how land trusts are evolving to meet new, more diverse challenges. Over years of planning, Greenbelt worked with Owens Farm's other owners — the adjacent Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center, the City of Corvallis and Benton County — to find ways that the land can improve public health and make it safer for nearby kids and families to get to school and work.

The result: When Owens Farm opens to the public this year, it will feature an extensive trail network to benefit residents and thousands of hospital employees, patients and families. It will also include a new bicycle-pedestrian bridge to connect neighborhoods on the other side of Highway 99 — which have long lacked access to natural areas and safe transportation options — to new trails at the farm and to the rest of the city.

“The real ‘aha moment’ for us as a partnership was to realize this isn't just about the incredible work that we're doing to have an inclusive, universally accessible trail system. We needed to think bigger,” McDonald says. “This ended up becoming the highest-ranking project at a state grant level for funding, because it speaks to so many values. Now we're always looking for projects that are multifaceted and serve a diverse array of community needs, as well as our conservation goals.”

What You Can Do

- Read more about the [Oregon Lands and People Project](#), a partnership of Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts, Land Trust Alliance, and Oregon Community Foundation.
- Visit oregoncf.org/environment and learn more about the Oregon's Lands and People Fund at OCF. Contact [Carlos Garcia](#), Senior Program Officer, Environment: cgarcia@oregoncf.org or (503) 227-6486.

About Oregon Community Foundation

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