



News Release

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New partnership to work cooperatively to improve forest health on thousands of acres in Tieton Canyon

Naches – Restoring the health, natural structure, and productivity of forests and shrub-steppe in the dramatic Tieton River Canyon of south central Washington has been made easier, thanks to an agreement signed today by The Nature Conservancy, the USDA Forest Service, and the Washington State Departments of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and Natural Resources (DNR).

The agreement—signed at the headquarters of WDFW’s Oak Creek Wildlife Area on US 12—creates the Tieton Forest Collaborative, a coalition that will encourage greater cooperation and coordination on issues ranging from forest health to recreation. The four signatories are major landowners/managers in the Tieton Canyon, a biologically rich area 20 miles west of Yakima with a checkerboard ownership pattern.

The scale of the Tieton Forest Collaborative is unprecedented in Eastern Washington, covering an area of nearly 200,000 publicly owned acres, one-fifth of which is of immediate focus. The collaborative provides a way for its members to concentrate on their individual missions while planning and working across ownership boundaries on a number of mutual goals.

“This is a wonderful example of federal and state agencies and private citizens working together to manage and conserve important forest and natural areas,” said Jim Boynton, Supervisor of the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests. “This cooperation will benefit ecosystems and wildlife that don’t recognize ownership boundaries and will pay dividends for future generations who will appreciate the wildlife and scenery of this special area.”

“All of the members of the coalition recognize the common underlying ecology of this landscape,” said Doug Sutherland, Commissioner of Public Lands and DNR’s administrator. “And we recognize that management needs to be approached differently in the dry Eastern Washington forestlands, including on state trust lands in the region. Under careful examination, the partners found we shared most goals for our lands, so agreement on working together to achieve ecological health was an easy next step.”

The collaborative is made particularly significant because of the unique ecology of Eastside forests and the number of imperiled animals found in the Tieton, a place of considerable diversity due to its location between the Columbia Basin shrub-steppe and the forested eastern front of the Cascades.

“Under the patchwork of land ownership we have been precluded from using tools such as fire management to benefit the forest ecosystem,” said Jeff Koenings, WDFW director. “This agreement will allow us to use those tools to be better stewards of fish, wildlife and forests.”

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“The Tieton Canyon is a spectacular place, and it warrants this kind of attention,” said David Weekes, director of The Nature Conservancy’s Washington chapter. “Thanks to the farsightedness of our public partners, we have an opportunity to showcase a model of collaboration that will help to ensure the Tieton’s ecological health and that we believe can be replicated elsewhere.”

Collaborative shares common goals

In 2003, the Nature Conservancy began raising public and private funds for the purchase of more than 10,000 acres within the Tieton Canyon from Plum Creek Timber Co. and transferring most of those lands to WDFW—real estate transactions that are now nearly completed. That effort means large swaths of the Tieton Canyon are, for the first time, almost entirely in public or conservation ownership.

But because the ownership pattern is checker-boarded—a historic legacy from Washington’s pre-statehood days—the four parties recognized the need to work collaboratively to ensure the lands protected by the Conservancy and those surrounding it are managed effectively and with an eye towards the larger landscape. In working to draft the non-binding agreement, the four parties identified several areas where that kind of cooperation made sense. Among their shared goals are:

- Natural plant community restoration and control of invasive weeds.
- Science-based management tools, including use of prescribed fire to restore forest health.
- Management of recreation use and access.
- Recovery of animals listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.
- Ongoing land protection.
- Knowledge of affected lands and resources.

The knowledge gained through this collaborative process will be shared to promote dry-site forest and shrub-steppe restoration in other parts of Eastern Washington and the Eastern Cascades.

The collaborative partners

The Nature Conservancy is a private, non-profit organization working to preserve the plants animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth. The Conservancy, which played a major role in bringing the parties together, is retaining ownership of 640 acres within the core planning area.

The USDA Forest Service has major responsibility for protecting and managing biodiversity, fish, wildlife, and plant habitats, including providing special protection for threatened, endangered and sensitive/rare plant and animal species. The Forest Service manages the Wenatchee National Forest, including the Naches Ranger District in the collaborative’s core planning area.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife protects, restores and enhances diverse and healthy fish and wildlife habitats, while providing sustainable fish and wildlife-related recreational and commercial opportunities. It manages the Oak Creek Wildlife Area in the core planning area.

The Washington Department of Natural Resources manages state trust lands in the core planning area under a habitat conservation plan that guides management decisions to protect at-risk animals and fish and their habitat, while harvesting timber and carrying out other activities that earn funding for state schools and universities.