

Voluntary Effort to Enhance Endangered Species Habitat And Family Forests in Lewis County



Family forest landowners in Lewis County, Washington, realize that in order to remain economically viable, they must include sustainable forest practices and the Endangered Species Act in their yearly operational plans. To achieve this, a group of family forest owners established the Family Forest Foundation (Foundation), a 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation. The six member board recognizes that conservation of sustainable family forests is essential to maintaining ecological, social and economic well being in rural urban interfaces and beyond. They also believe that good communication and collaborative participation by stakeholder interests is key to devising a plan that will meet the needs of all resource interests.

In 2001, the Foundation began developing a multi-landowner, multi-species

Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for family-owned forests in Lewis County. An HCP is a federally recognized natural resource management plan developed by a landowner. It details how impacts to wildlife habitat will be minimized during the course of conducting resource management activities (e.g. harvesting timber). When complete, this HCP will provide 100 years of regulatory certainty against changes in state and federal regulations. It will give landowners the incentive to develop long-term management plans that enhance and maintain wildlife habitat -- while they are growing high quality timber.

“The Foundation has embraced the collaborative approach to negotiation from the beginning of the HCP process for several reasons,” says Steve Stinson, second generation family forest landowner, and Executive Director of the Foundation. “First, common ground must be found between forest resource users and producers. Second, the Foundation is relying on

the development of new scientific approaches to support the HCP proposal. In both cases we believe the collaborative process is the best mechanism to ensure that we develop an HCP document that will be acceptable to all.”

The Foundation board members represent family forest owners in Lewis County on the HCP. Other stakeholders include the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, NOAA Fisheries staff, Department of Ecology (*Clean Water Act*), WA Department of Fish & Wildlife, WA Department of Natural Resources, affected Indian tribes, and consultants working for the Foundation on biological and legal issues.

The HCP is a voluntary, locally led program. This HCP targets 2,350 family forest landowners that represent approximately 133,000 acres of low elevation productive forests, many adjacent to salmon bearing streams. Landowners will be able to enroll in the HCP by developing an “Implementation Plan” that incorporates sections of the HCP relevant to their

individual properties. Current regulations are creating a disincentive for forest landowners to manage their lands as forests. "If an endangered species took up residence in habitat on private forestland, under federal law, that forestland would become off-limits to timber harvesting. Consequently, many landowners are questioning whether they should grow older, larger-diameter timber that provides high quality wildlife habitat," says Tom Fox, private woodlot owner and Foundation board president. "We put our heads together and decided that there had to be a win/win situation for wildlife and family forest owners, this is why we started the HCP."

Project Funding:

Funding has been provided through a Department of Interior appropriation and a Section 6 Habitat Conservation Planning grant, Washington State Department of Natural Resources Forest Stewardship Program, the Weyerhaeuser Family Foundation, and Lewis County, totaling \$ 980,000. Additionally, in-kind contributions (volunteer hours donated by the Foundation board, and others) for the HCP

currently total over \$500,000. Further funding is being sought for completion and implementation of this project.

Good Progress: To date, the Foundation has completed watershed scale GIS analysis for the entire family forest ownership in Lewis County; developed innovative, science-based approaches to managing riparian forests, protecting water quality and enhancing salmon habitat - while utilizing an independent scientific review process; and developed and implemented a series of case-studies to evaluate the environmental and economic performance of the management prescriptions in the HCP. Six landowners have volunteered use of 1,183 acres of forestland as case-studies for pilot implementation of the HCP. This HCP project is targeted for completion in December of 2005. The HCP committee is currently reviewing the upland and riparian management proposals. "Our collaborative process is resulting not only in enhanced wildlife habitat and regulatory certainty, but also provides important public values such as healthy watersheds, clean

air, clean water, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, aesthetics, and contributions to local economies and culture," says Stinson.

The next steps are to complete the NEPA/EIS process and then finish the remaining HCP document pieces. Then the Foundation will provide the necessary training and assistance to help landowners who want to "opt-in" to the HCP, to develop their own individual plans. These will include stewardship coached-planning sessions, technical assistance, legal consultation, and data acquisition for the development of those plans. In many cases the prescriptions required will yield higher levels of riparian and upland ecological function than the state's Forest and Fish rules. When complete the HCP will become the first multi-landowner and multi-species HCP in the nation for family forest landowners.

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