This report is intended for internal use by Whatcom Land Trust’s Board of Directors and staff to guide the strategic and proactive conservation efforts of the organization.

The mission of Whatcom Land Trust is to preserve and protect wildlife habitat, scenic, agricultural and open space lands in Whatcom County for future generations by securing interests in land and promoting land stewardship.

Contents
Executive Summary .................................................................................................................................................. 3
I. Introduction ......................................................................................................................................................... 3
   A. Purpose and Scope of the Land Protection Plan .......................................................................................... 3
   B. The Context in which WLT Works .............................................................................................................. 4
   C. Conservation Targets ................................................................................................................................. 5
II. Community Outreach ........................................................................................................................................ 7
III. Land Conservation Focal Areas ..................................................................................................................... 10
   1. Lake Whatcom Watershed Focal Area (31,101 Acres) .............................................................................. 11
   2. Coastal Shorelines ..................................................................................................................................... 12
   3. Whatcom Core Agricultural Zone (125,000 Acres) ............................................................................... 14
   4. North & Middle Forks of the Nooksack & Major Tributaries (254,330 Acres) ..................................... 16
   5. Chuckanut Mountain Focal Area (15,721 Acres) .................................................................................. 17
   6. South Fork Nooksack River Valley (37,357 acres) ................................................................................. 18
   7. Upper South Fork Nooksack and Major Tributaries (79,730 Acres) .................................................... 20
IV. Project Selection ............................................................................................................................................. 22
V. Prioritization of Projects .................................................................................................................................. 24
   Planning Tiers .................................................................................................................................................. 24
   Potential Project Table and Timeline ........................................................................................................... 25
VI. Appendices ...................................................................................................................................................... 26
   Appendix A. Land Conservation Plan - Goals and Objectives ...................................................................... 26
   Appendix B- Threats, Layers of Protection and Conservation Tools ............................................................ 28
   1. Vulnerability, Threat, & Future Risk ........................................................................................................... 28
Executive Summary

Since 1984, Whatcom Land Trust (WLT) has been protecting land in Whatcom County by working with private landowners, community groups, conservation partners, and public agencies to protect Whatcom County’s natural heritage. WLT protects lands in perpetuity via three principal methods: 1) securing a legal interest in it, 2) promoting the protection of it by public agencies, and 3) promoting the stewardship of it. Land protected by WLT may end up being owned by WLT, private landowners, public agencies or other appropriate entities. As of July 2015, WLT has partnered in the protection of over 20,000 acres. WLT holds conservation easements on more than 6,400 acres on 76 properties on a mix of privately, publicly and tribally owned lands. These lands include working farms, forests, shorelines and special habitats, as well as parks managed by public agencies such as Whatcom County Parks & Recreation and the City of Bellingham Public Works. WLT owns fee title interest to over 3,800 acres of land.

The focus of the land protection effort identified in the Land Conservation Plan (LCP) is to protect Whatcom County’s most significant and threatened lands, while retaining its working farms and forests. The LCP prioritizes properties that are ecologically significant (i.e. properties that support a full complement of native species and ecological functions and processes), or with minimal restoration, can accomplish the same. Emphasis is placed on protecting larger land parcels or lands adjacent to or providing linking corridors to larger blocks of protected lands.

WLT seeks to achieve multiple conservation objectives by protecting and restoring natural and working lands of regional and local significance. The LCP prioritizes projects that achieve multiple conservation targets. WLT’s conservation work will help to ensure that Whatcom County remains a sustainable, resilient community with naturally functioning ecosystems that foster fish and wildlife habitat, clean air and water, healthy forests, low-impact recreation and productive farms.

I. Introduction

A. Purpose and Scope of the Land Protection Plan

The tools used in strategic conservation planning, including project selection criteria, focus areas, and suitability analysis, help WLT to make informed choices that have lasting public value and are within its capacity to effectively steward these conservation resources. This Land Conservation Plan (LCP) is intended to strategically guide WLT’s land protection work over the next five years, to maximize the public benefit of these conservation investments, and to ensure enduring conservation persists in an unknowable future. The LCP builds upon and refines previous conservation and strategic planning efforts undertaken by WLT.
WLT’s 2013-18 Strategic Plan calls for a new land protection effort focused on achieving multiple conservation objectives by protecting and restoring natural and working lands of regional and local significance. The Land Conservation Plan identifies, evaluates, and prioritizes conservation targets and strategies across Whatcom County at the landscape scale. From strategic planning in 2013, Board and staff identified and reaffirmed the following broad conservation themes as WLT’s conservation focus:

- Protect and restore salmon habitat
- Protect the Lake Whatcom Watershed
- Increase efforts to conserve farmland
- Mitigate the impacts of climate change
- Become a more visible community leader

The Land Conservation Plan is a strategic guide to implement WLT’s conservation vision. Land protection begins by securing a conservation interest, transferring ownership, or changing a management regime in order to protect conservation values. Stewardship safeguards those interests now and into the future and ensures that management measures achieve the desired conservation outcome. In order to be effective, WLT must link our LCP and stewardship to a broader community engagement campaign that will also broaden our financial support. Appendix A includes specific goals and objectives for WLT to achieve its strategic mission.

B. The Context in which WLT Works

WLT has conducted the majority of its work in the western third of Whatcom County, which is the non-federally owned and managed portion of the County. WLT’s service areas are generally within Whatcom County, and the Nooksack Watershed where overlaps into Skagit County occur. Approximately 80% of Whatcom County is either covered with forest or is managed for forest resources. Nearly two-thirds of the County is federally owned and managed by either the USDA Forest Service or the National Park Service. Water resources in Whatcom County include 16 major lakes and dozens of smaller ones, 3,012 miles of rivers and streams and their estuaries, over 37,000 acres of wetlands, and 134 miles of marine shoreline on the Salish Sea.

Prior to the 1800s, the greater Whatcom County area consisted of the traditional tribal territories of the Semiahmoo, Lummi, Nooksack and Samish peoples. Treaties with the U.S. government in 1855 limited the two tribal sovereign nations’ (the Nooksack Tribe and Lummi Nation) territorial extent and established rights to traditional resources. The Nooksack Indian Tribe’s traditional homeland is located on the main stem and forks of the Nooksack River, but mostly in the Deming and Everson areas. Lummi Nation is predominantly centered on the lower Nooksack River and marine areas. In the 1850s, European-Americans established settlements in Whatcom County. Traditional resource industries of agriculture, fishing, forestry, and mining defined Whatcom County’s economy for over a century. Today, services, retail trade, government, public education, manufacturing and construction account for 85% of Whatcom County’s economic activity. Two major petroleum refineries (BP and Phillips 66) and an aluminum smelter (Intalco) operate along the shoreline at Cherry Point on the Strait of Georgia. Western Washington University is located in Bellingham.

There is strong evidence that suggests climate change will be a significant challenge for the future of Whatcom County and the Cascades to Chuckanut (C2C) region. Climate change impacts are predicted to affect the distribution of species by altering physical
and biological systems. Within our region, climate change is predicted to alter the timing and availability of water and increase stress to upland forests. The availability of clean and sufficient water limits population growth and development, food production, natural processes, and species distribution. We can anticipate that the timing and availability of water will shift with our rapidly changing climate and increasing demands from continued population growth. Water is essential to both the human and natural world. Water is what grows our forests and produces food when combined with our fertile soils. Clean, cold water provides habitat for the Pacific Northwest’s iconic salmon, a critical link in a natural food web spanning the upland old growth forests and the Salish Sea.

Population growth and associated human activities further compound the demand for natural resources. Over the course of 30 years coinciding with WLT’s work, Whatcom County’s population nearly doubled from about 100,000 to just over 200,000 today. Projections estimate as many as 150,000 new residents will make their homes here by the year 2040.

C. Conservation Targets

WLT has identified six features we believe best embody the splendor of Whatcom County and therefore, should be our primary conservation targets. Because we consider these features to be crucial for sustaining the ecological and human health of our County, WLT will focus on subareas of the County where we can best protect these features. Accordingly, we will identify these subareas or “Focal Areas” in Section IV of this plan. The following provides a short description of each feature and why they merit conservation.

- Water Quantity and Water Quality
- Habitat
- Forests
- Working Farmland
- Community Open Space & Recreation
- Coastal Shoreline

**Water Quantity and Water Quality** – Water is the critical medium of life, and is necessary to support sustainable, harvestable salmon populations, shellfish that are safe to eat, a viable agricultural economy, livable communities, a thriving outdoor recreation industry, and natural beauty. Meanwhile, sufficient clean freshwater and saltwater are decreasing in quantity and quality commensurate with the demand for water caused by increased population growth and human activities.

**Habitat** – Habitat includes old-growth and mature forests, wetlands, streams, marine shores, and other smaller scale features such as caves, cliffs, talus and snags. These habitats support numerous plant and animal species from microorganisms and insects to amphibians, birds, fish and mammals. Local, state and federal agencies have identified and prioritized the protection of certain flora and fauna, classifying them as important, sensitive, vulnerable, declining, or threatened with extinction. WLT will give high preference to priority habitats that support a diversity of species and provide for resilience and adaptation over time.

**Forests** – Areas managed for timber, wildlife habitat and other special features. Working forests are compatible with conservation efforts when well managed. In addition to timber products, forests offer watershed protection, clean air, carbon sequestration, natural beauty, wildlife habitat, and places for personal reflection and recreation. High preference is given to old-growth, mature, and diverse forests (or forests that with minimal restoration can become this way), large tracts of intact working forest, and forests with a diversity of edge conditions (shorelines, wetlands, meadows) or with rare species or communities of species.
**Working Farmland** – Habitat, open space, and local food production are lost forever when farmland (used for growing crops or raising animals) is replaced by development. Farmland is vital to our community’s future; conserving it protects food production, open space and livable communities. Large blocks of farmland also provide habitat for native species such as raptors, waterfowl, and small mammals. High preference is given to land with prime soils or soils of state-wide importance, farms with legal water rights, large farms, properties adjoining farmland, and farmland with special conservation features such as floodplains and river corridors.

**Community Open Space & Recreation** – Community open spaces add to the quality of life for Whatcom residents and visitors. These areas are used for low-impact diverse muscle-powered recreation and provide access to local natural areas, walking trails, wildlife viewing, environmental education sites, and scenic vistas. High preference is given to large undeveloped parcels of land with unique or attractive features and lands protected with the cooperation of public agencies and private landowners.

**Coastal Shorelines** – Whatcom County’s marine shores provide critical habitat provide habitat for a wide variety of organisms. Shoreline habitats include the estuary of the Nooksack River, eelgrass beds, sandy and rocky beaches, feeder bluffs and coastal forests. Shorelines are critical in connecting land and marine environments and play a key role in our local economy. High preference is given to estuaries that can be relatively easily restored, public beach access, tidelands adjacent to public tidelands, intact feeder bluffs, and forage fish habitats.
II. Community Outreach

1. Introduction

Community engagement is an ongoing goal for the WLT outlined in the Land Conservation Plan 2017 update. To continue to make strides towards this goal, the WLT administered a public survey over a six-month period beginning in 2016 and ending in 2017 to the residents of Whatcom County. The intention of the survey was to gather local feedback on the community’s conservation priorities for the seven focal areas outlined in the Land Conservation Plan. Funds for the project came from the Whatcom Community Foundation’s Fund for Whatcom County Grant Round and from the Land Trust Alliance.

Research conducted prior to the survey generated a list of community groups throughout the focal areas to present the survey to. By the end of the project, WLT had surveyed a total of 261 participants in-person and online from over 30 different organizations. The majority of the participants (65%) reside in Bellingham and are 60 or older (50%). 47% of participants were at least somewhat familiar with the WLT, 33% were very familiar, and only 4% were not familiar at all.

Figure 1: Where do you live?

Figure 2: How old are you?
A brochure was produced to display the survey results. The answers for each question are weighted in regards to priority. The results are displayed on a Whatcom County map using simple graphics to represent the top two community priority action for each focal area.

2. Results

By administering this public survey, the WLT gained a greater understanding of the local population’s vision and priorities. With this knowledge, the Land Trust can continue to pursue conservation actions that are in line with community values. Additionally, the public survey facilitated conversation between organizations in the community and the Whatcom Land Trust, building on a relationship that is critical to the success of the WLT’s mission.

Specifically, the survey reflects the public’s conservation priorities in the seven focal areas and in general, such as what actions they believe are of greater priority in each area. By having information regarding the public’s opinion, the LT may have a greater understanding of what actions are strongly supported by residents and which are not.

2a. Conservation Values

One of the major over-arching questions posed to the community was what did they consider to be their top conservation priorities in Whatcom County as a whole. The survey results show that water quality and quantity is a top priority to the community. Given the recent Hirst decision and increasing urban development in the Lake Whatcom Watershed, this will likely remain a top priority in Whatcom County.

Figure 3: In your opinion, what are the top conservation priorities for the future?
2b. Focal Areas

The other major, over-arching question posed to participants was what they considered to be the focal areas of greatest priority. Results show the majority of participants believe the Lake Whatcom Watershed is the greatest priority for future conservation projects. This result reflects the public's #1 conservation value, water quality and quantity.

Participants were also asked what conservation actions they prioritized specific to each of the focal areas. For example, some actions might be 'restore forested river corridor', or 'limit development in sensitive areas'. The results for each focal area are displayed in III. Land Conservation Focal Areas.

3. Future Steps

The public survey results provide WLT with suggestions for future action. WLT will continue the collection of community feedback through public surveys to better understand the needs and wants of the local population following this initial survey. It is important for the future that the LT reaches more distant communities, such as the Deming area. The challenge for the future is then to find creative ways to reach communities that are distant in both space, age, and perspectives to the WLT, bridging the communication gap between local stakeholders and the Land Trust.
The symbols on the map represent the priorities identified from the public survey. Size of the symbols indicate priority ranking.

- #1 Public Priority
- #2 Public Priority

Priority areas include:
- Restore forested river corridor
- Improve water quality and quantity
- Protect shorelines for habitat
- Protect and increase side channel habitat for salmon
- Protect more farmland from development
- Protect habitat and wildlife corridors
- Protect adjacent forests and wetlands
- Limit development in sensitive areas

Public Priorities for Focal Areas:
- Restore forested river corridor
- Improve water quality and quantity
- Protect shorelines for habitat
- Protect and increase side channel habitat for salmon
- Protect more farmland from development
- Protect habitat and wildlife corridors
- Protect adjacent forests and wetlands
- Limit development in sensitive areas
III. Land Conservation Focal Areas

Focus areas have been refined over the years with direct input from local natural resource experts in order to determine the highest protection priorities based on federal, state and local assessments. For example, over the past decade, Whatcom County Planning Department has completed in-depth studies surrounding the stated goal of protecting farmland and agricultural viability. Similarly, tribal, governmental and non-profit partners have been working to recover sustainable harvestable populations of salmon in the Nooksack River system and have completed many general assessments for each of the forks of the Nooksack River. The goals, objectives and data of previous planning efforts form the basis for the land protection focal areas.

Within the larger landscape of Whatcom County, the Cascades to Chuckanuts (C2C) area is the highest priority for WLT’s conservation work over the next six years. Within the C2C geographic region, there are five distinct focal areas including the Upper South Fork of the Nooksack, South Fork Valley, North and Middle Forks of the Nooksack, Lake Whatcom Watershed, and Chuckanut Mountain. Within each focal area, there are a unique set of conservation values, threats, and recommended strategies. The next highest priorities include the Whatcom lowlands and coastal shorelines. The Whatcom lowlands’ central focus is on farmland protection, and on the conservation of floodplains and large wetland complexes within the smaller coastal watersheds. Protecting coastal shorelines is also a high priority, but opportunities for conservation projects are extremely limited.

Below is a map of the seven focal areas of Whatcom County, in addition to their top two conservation priorities displayed as graphics. The number of each focal area indicates public priority status, i.e. #1 is the Lake Whatcom Watershed.
1. Lake Whatcom Watershed Focal Area (31,101 Acres)

Public Priority #1: Purchase and Remove Development Rights
Public Priority #2: Improve Water Quality

Description: The glacially-carved 7.6-square-mile Lake Whatcom is flanked by rugged Lookout Mountain (Galbraith) to the west, Stewart Mountain to the east, Anderson Mountain to the south, and Squalicum Mountain to the north. Lake Whatcom is approximately 10 miles long and one mile wide. Approximately 18,329 acres (60%) of the watershed is zoned Commercial Forestry (CF), most of which is publicly owned. About 15,000 people live in the Lake Whatcom Watershed. The Lake Whatcom reservoir is the drinking water supply for some 100,000 people in the City of Bellingham and parts of Whatcom County, nearly half of the County’s residents. But its water quality has been in decline and is listed as impaired for dissolved oxygen primarily due to elevated levels of phosphorus. As of 2014, the 36,000-acre (56 square-mile) watershed had approximately 6,877 dwelling units located within it, and under current regulation an estimated 1,811 potential development units remain on vacant land. The City of Bellingham has actively pursued purchase of lands to reduce watershed development and restore forest cover. The Land Trust has been a conservation partner on many transactions and holds conservation interest in more than 1,500 acres in the watershed. Forestland dominates the rugged foothills in the watershed. DNR is a major landowner with 6,239 acres remaining, after the recent transfer of 8,440 acres from the DNR to Whatcom County. This changed the management from timber production to park and watershed management. Native Kokanee, a form of sockeye salmon, live in Lake Whatcom and its tributary creeks.

Strategies for WLT to pursue:

- Acquisition of preserves and conservation easements for watershed protection; acquisition primarily by donation.
- Facilitate transfer and / or acquisition by City of Bellingham Watershed Acquisition Program or Whatcom County for watershed protection or parks and open space.
- Advocate for good public policy for protection and stewardship
Due to the reliance on outside sources for data, no warranty for the accuracy of data! Boundaries are approximate!
Data Sources: 2015 NAIP Air Photo - USDA, Boundaries derived from PLS & 2016 Tax Parcel Data?
PLS, Water, Trans - WA DNR;
2. Coastal Shorelines

**Public Priority #1: Protect Shorelines for Habitat**

**Public Priority #2: Protect Adjacent Forests and Wetlands**

**Description:** Whatcom County has 134 miles of marine shoreline with a variety of shore forms, including river deltas and estuaries, feeder bluffs, sandy beaches, and rocky shorelines. Each shore form provides important habitat values and recreational opportunities. Much of the shoreline is privately owned or used for important economic industries. A large part of the County's shoreline is constrained by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad along with high impact industrial, urban, and fragmented private ownership going through Bellingham and northward. Very few large undeveloped ecologically significant shoreline properties remain. The historic and current deltas of the Nooksack River are primarily on Lummi Nation land. WDFW and Whatcom County Parks own much of the east bank floodplain. Maintaining geomorphic processes on intact feeder bluffs in Whatcom County such as Lily Point at Point Roberts and Point Whitehorn south of Birch Bay, is important to protect and sustain marine near-shore habitats. Tidelands that offer public access are included in Cherry Point Aquatic Reserve managed by DNR and the Point Whitehorn Marine Reserve managed by Whatcom County Parks.

Primary objectives are to allow natural processes to occur and provide public access to water. Rocky shoreline dominates the Chuckanut shoreline area. Teddy Bear Cove, Woodstock Farm and Larrabee State Park offer public access.

*Figure 6: map of Whatcom County's shorelines*
and shoreline protection. Governor’s Point would be a logical addition to Larrabee State Park, with the primary intent to facilitate public access for land and water recreation. Because public access is the primary goal of Governor’s Point, having an appropriate long-term manager for the site will be critical before pursuing acquisition.

**Strategies:**

- Facilitate acquisition, trades and exchanges to protect shoreline features and provide public access to marine water.

2a. **Coastal Watersheds – Wetland Complexes (>320 Acres)**

**Description:** Terrell Creek is a small coastal watershed that enters Birch Bay, where extensive intertidal and subtidal flats interface with a coastal community popular for recreation and vacation homes. Birch Bay State Park, the ARCO Terrell Creek Heron Colony conservation easements, the Lake Terrell Wildlife Area and BP Cherry Point Refinery are major features within this watershed. Some of the upper portions of this watershed have extensive wetland complexes (>160 acres), which provide habitat and protect water quality. Drayton Harbor is a coastal embayment fed by Dakota Creek and California Creek. Drayton Harbor has historically been important for shellfish, but harvest has been heavily impacted by water-borne contaminants from both urban and rural portions of the watershed. Drayton Harbor is an important area for migratory shorebirds and waterfowl. This focal area contains two large wetland complexes, which provide significant habitat and help protect shoreline water quality by trapping sediment and pollutants prior to entering Drayton Harbor and adjacent Boundary Bay.

**Strategies for WLT to pursue:**

- Acquire, trade or exchange wetlands for restoration of natural processes, habitat and protection of water quality.
- Pursue wetland mitigation projects that may be required for highway, rail and pipeline impacts during upgrades or expansion
3. Whatcom Core Agricultural Zone (125,000 Acres)

Public Priority #1: Protect More Farmland from Development
Public Priority #2: Improve Water Quality & Quantity

Description: For more than a decade Whatcom County has had a stated goal to maintain a critical mass of at least 100,000 acres of farmland to sustain agriculture as a viable part of the economy. Approximately 85,000 acres of the County is zoned Agriculture. Whatcom County has identified an additional 15,000 acres with significant agricultural value as Rural Study Areas to focus on in order to reach the critical mass of farmland. The four pillars of farmland protection are 1) land use regulation, 2) purchase and transfer of development rights, 3) property tax relief, and 4) economic development (American FarmLand Trust 2012) all of which are being implemented at some level in Whatcom County. The 85,000-acre Agricultural Zone and 15,000 acres of Rural Study Areas together form the core working farmland of Whatcom County. This core is primarily dedicated to protecting soils to grow food and is primarily protected through the Agricultural Purchase of Development Rights Target Areas. Areas with prime soils and water rights should be highest priority.

Fragmentation of ownership by subdivision complicates management and viability of farmland. As a result, hundreds of existing non-conforming legal lots of record (1 to 5 acres in size) are scattered throughout the Agriculture Zone and could be developed or sold independently. Land conversion to residential development and other non-farming uses, land disturbance, loss of productive soils, urbanization and increased impervious surfaces all threaten the viability of farmland. With 30 percent of US farmers over 65 and an estimated 70 percent of all farmland set to change hands over the next 20 years, the transition of land ownership over the next decades will be unprecedented (Farmland and Conservation 2.0). Farmland affordability is essential to securing land tenure for a new generation of farmers who bring passion, but do not have access to land. Protected farmland is being underutilized or going out of production, and is selling at prices that will never be affordable to a working farmer.

Strategies for WLT to pursue:

- Acquire agricultural protection conservation easements on large viable farms with prime soils, water available for growing food and at risk of conversion to non-farming use.
- Purchase properties, protect them with conservation easements and then re-sell or lease.
- Work with starting farmers as conservation buyers to purchase agricultural conservation easement (which pays for the value of the development rights) to make farmland access more affordable.
- Consider use of affirmative agricultural production language and Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV) when acquiring agricultural protection conservation easements.
- Participate and support effective Purchase of Development Rights and/or Transfer of Development Rights Programs.
Due to the reliance on outside sources for data, no warranty for the accuracy of data! Boundaries are approximate!

Data sources: 2015 NAIP Air Photo - USDA, PLS, Water, Trans - WA DNR.
- Educate decision-makers on the importance of economic development to the success of farmland conservation.
- Advocate for local regulations and programs favorable to farmland conservation. Develop clear land and water policy positions and engage the community to promote farmland conservation.

3a. Nooksack River Floodplain (Estimate. 25,000 Acres)

**Description:** The Nooksack River floodplain is just over 50 square miles beginning at the confluence of the North and South Forks of the Nooksack River near Deming and extending to the delta at Bellingham Bay. The communities of Everson/Nooksack, Lynden and Ferndale are all partially located within the floodplain. This is an important area for farming, flood management and salmon recovery. The integration of these three activities will be the challenge and conservation opportunity for this focal area. South and downstream of Ferndale there is nearly a thousand acres of publically conserved and restored floodplain on the left bank of the river including Hovander Homestead Park and the Washington Dept. of Fish & Wildlife’s (WDFW) Tennant Lake and Nooksack Wildlife Areas. WLT could play a role in developing the Bay to Baker Trail along the River.

**Strategies for WLT to pursue:**
- Advocate for floodplain policy that advances habitat protection and recovery.
- Support and facilitate integrated floodplain management projects, transfers, trades, and exchanges to help farming remain viable, reduce flood risk, and protect and restore habitat.
- Protect farmland by acquiring conservation easements for large intact farms to preserve open space and reduce development and fragmentation in the floodplain. (Note that new development is currently prohibited in the floodway, but not necessarily in the floodplain.)
- Acquire fee title and conservation easements for areas with intact, properly functioning conditions, or areas that can be easily restored.
4. North & Middle Forks of the Nooksack & Major Tributaries (254,330 Acres)

Public Priority #1: Protect and Increase Side Channel Habitat for Salmon
Public Priority #2: Restore Forested River Corridor

Description: This priority area is dominated by the North and Middle Forks of the Nooksack River and its major tributary streams like Canyon Creek, Maple Creek, and Clearwater Creek. The North Fork parallels the highway partway to the Mt. Baker Ski Area and Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest. Three quarters of the land in this subarea is managed either for conservation/recreation purposes (USFS- 55% ownership, WLT/County Parks- 1%) or publicly-owned, working forest (DNR- 19%). Another 15% of the forestland is privately owned with Sierra Pacific Industries as the dominant private forestland owner on both the North Fork and the Middle Fork. The North and Middle Forks have important salmon stocks, and an accompanying large winter presence of bald eagles. In addition, this area has many outstanding recreational opportunities, such as the Bay to Baker Trail, Silver Lake County Park and Canyon Lake Community Forest. WLT has invested substantially in salmon habitat protection along the North Fork and has coordinated restoration efforts with the Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association (NSEA) and the Salmon Recovery Team. There are about a dozen large privately-owned riverfront lands remaining on the North and Middle Forks that are not protected. These properties, which are mostly zoned for Rural Forestry (RF), could be developed as cabins and mountain estates, further fragmenting ownership and threatening sensitive riparian habitat.

Strategies for WLT to pursue:

- Direct acquisition of preserves along river corridors (there are currently around 10,000 acres zoned RF), and acquisition and management of community forests, as was done with Canyon Lake Community Forest.
- Acquisition of conservation easements primarily for larger working landscapes to preserve open space and prevent further fragmentation of ownership and conversion to non-forest use. There are roughly 30-35,000 acres of privately-owned working forests in this area.
- Acquisition of smaller working forest conservation easements thus avoiding fragmentation and ensuring best management practices.
- Facilitation of transfers, trades, exchanges. These trades and exchanges would enable us to restore riparian forests and larger wetlands complexes, and to manage a larger riparian core to better restore natural processes.
- Advocacy for policies that promote the sale of ecosystems services, carbon offsets, etc.
5. Chuckanut Mountain Focal Area (15,721 Acres)

Public Priority #1: Protect Habitat and Wildlife Corridors

Public Priority #2: Limit Residential Development

**Description:** The Chuckanut Mountain focal area is the westernmost of the C2C focal areas, straddling the line between Whatcom and Skagit Counties. Chuckanut Mountain, Blanchard Mountain and Lookout Mountain are dominated by sandstone folds ranging in elevation from sea level to over 2,300 feet. Larrabee State Park on the western edge offers shoreline access and camping as well as hiking, biking, and equestrian use of extensive trails on Chuckanut Mountain. Ownership is dominated by private and state commercial forestland and State and County parkland. Most of the focal area is zoned Commercial Forestry and Recreation Open Space. Lake Samish is situated on the eastern half of the Chuckanut Mountain focal area. The shoreline fringe of Lake Samish is mostly developed with rural residences. The Pacific Northwest Trail crosses Blanchard Mountain over DNR and privately-owned timberlands. The Chuckanut Mountain Focal Area has rich habitat, including mature second growth forest, wetlands, snags, cliffs, caves, and wildlife corridors. Private working forests and parklands offer recreation opportunities with multi-use trails throughout this focal area.

The Chuckanut Mountain focal area is vulnerable to fragmentation through subdivision, and conversion to residential and other uses. Pollution and degradation to aquatic resources through current logging and associated road building, short timber rotations, and changing ownership with the associated shifts in management objectives are also threats. Recreation should be managed to mitigate impacts from unregulated trail construction, ORV use and off trail use.

**Strategies for WLT to pursue:**

- Facilitate transfers, trades, exchanges.
- Obtain working forest conservation easements to limit fragmentation, conversion to non-forest use and implement best management practices to provide for resilient diverse forests.
- Obtain conservation financing through sale of ecosystems services (quantify market value of clean air, water, soil, etc.), carbon offsets, and recreation easements.
- Acquire community working forest to demonstrate conservation management best practices.
Due to the reliance on outside sources for data, no warranty for the accuracy of data!
BOUNDARIES ARE APPROXIMATE!

Data Sources: 2015 NAP Air Photo - USDA, Boundaries derived from PLS & 2016 Tax Parcel Data PLS, Water, Trans - WA DNR,
Map produced by WLT on 6/2016
6. South Fork Nooksack River Valley (37,357 acres)

**Public Priority #1: Restore Forested River Corridor**

**Public Priority #2: Limit Development in Floodplains**

**Description:** This special valley is dominated by floodplain and wetland habitats and flanked by the foothills of Stewart Mountain to the west and the Van Zandt Dike and Blue Mountain to the East. All five species of Pacific salmon hold, spawn and rear in the snow-fed South Fork of the Nooksack River. Spring Chinook salmon is highly imperiled with the threat of extinction. WLT’s primary focus in this Valley has been to protect and restore the historic Spring Chinook migration zone plus an approximately 300-foot buffer along both sides of the river, and to protect large wetland areas that can store water in the floodplain. Dairy and beef cattle farming is the predominant land use in the valley, due to the rich floodplain soils. Balancing the needs of farming, floodplain mitigation and wildlife protection is the foundation of WLT's Farming for Food and Wildlife program and the South Fork Valley is the focal area which most embodies this complicated dynamic. Significant portions of the South Fork River in the Saxon area are already protected, and buffers are being reforested primarily for salmon recovery purposes. Whatcom County Parks owns the South Fork Park on the east bank of the river between Acme and Saxon, which will offer recreational opportunities as well as habitat protection. The South Fork River Valley contains overlapping natural features with a mix of conservation values that may conflict with one another. While water quality and habitat should be our primary focus in this area, we must also integrate farmland, floodplain resilience, and open space and recreational opportunities into our strategic efforts. Overall, many of our objectives could be accomplished if we did not own a lot of the properties, but instead facilitated reforestation efforts in buffers and riparian wetlands and/or held conservation easements in these areas. The Land Trust needs to be more proactive about communicating support for working farmland in this Valley in order to improve relationships with landowners and increase the likelihood of achieving its long-term conservation goals.

![Figure 9: land ownership in the South Fork Nooksack River Valley](image)
**Strategies for WLT to pursue:**

- Acquire properties to protect and restore in-stream, riparian and wetland habitats.
- Trades and exchanges with other private landowners for riverfront and wetlands properties to restore natural processes.
- Acquire conservation easements primarily for working land to prevent further fragmentation of ownership and development in the floodplain.
- Purchase properties, protect them with conservation easements, and then resell, lease or trade them.
- Collaborate with the Conservation District to advocate programs that promote restoration, conservation and stewardship such as CREP (Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program). Many of our conservation goals in this Valley could be achieved through this approach, if we had more support from the local landowners.
- Pursue wetland mitigation projects that may be required for highway, rail and pipeline impacts during future upgrades or expansions.
7. Upper South Fork Nooksack and Major Tributaries (79,730 Acres)

Public Priority #1: Restore Forested River Corridor

Public Priority #2: Improve Water Quality

Description: The upper South Fork of the Nooksack and its major tributaries including Skookum, Arlecho, and Cavanaugh Creeks, flow through a watershed dominated by forestland, primarily managed for timber. The waters of the Upper South Fork are a very important fishery resource, especially for the native South Fork spring Chinook salmon, a species which is on the brink of extinction. Ecological values include spawning and rearing habitat for all Pacific salmon, as well as steelhead, bull trout, rainbow trout and cutthroat trout. This basin is also important to salmon, eagle and elk. Many restoration projects are active in this area, in addition to habitat conservation efforts. Sierra Pacific (a private timber company) owns almost 50% of the land in the upper South Fork Nooksack basin. The remaining lands are all forested and have some level of protection with the US Forest Service owning 23%, Washington State Dept. of Natural Resources (DNR) owning 18% and other conservation-minded managers (The Nature Conservancy, WLT, Lummi Nation and Seattle Power & Light) owning the other 9%. The Nature Conservancy’s 650-acre Arlecho Creek Preserve is a rare patch of old growth forest.

Strategies for WLT to pursue:

- Direct fee title acquisition of preserves and community working forests. There are roughly 40,000 acres of private working forestland, which would cost approximately $30-$40 million dollars to purchase, making this strategy cost prohibitive. Targeting fee title acquisitions to several thousand acres of riparian corridors is more realistic and attainable.
- Acquisition of conservation easements from private timber companies primarily for larger forest tracts to prevent further fragmentation of ownership and conversion to non-forest use. Working forest conservation easements will focus on best management practices.
- Advocate for policies that promote the sale of ecosystems services. These may include paying for benefits provided by open space, habitat, flood mitigation, carbon capture, etc.
- Facilitate transfers, trades, exchanges between private owners and DNR or Forest Service. This could include trades and exchanges for riverfront and larger wetlands complexes for restoration purposes, or for consolidation of ownership to facilitate the management of a larger riparian core.
7a. Samish River Headwater Wetland Complex (4,887 Acres)

**Description:** While it sits in a separate watershed, this small subarea has similar dynamics as the Lower South Fork Valley. The Samish River Headwaters is a large wetland complex situated in a narrow valley between Anderson, Stewart, and Wickersham Mountains, and is adjacent to the South Fork Nooksack River Valley. The highly productive tributary streams like Ennis and NP Creeks and the associated wetlands of the Samish River form a Coho salmon stronghold. The productive tributaries provide rich spawning habitat and the wetlands serve as a nursery for the Coho salmon’s first two years of life. Many wetland-dependent migratory birds and waterfowl use the wetlands located in the Samish River headwaters. These wetlands flow to Samish Bay, an important bird area. The core of the wetland complex has been acquired and portions are under restoration. Opportunities remain to expand the preserve and create linkages. Unlike other subareas within this small area, WLT is the second largest landowner (after DNR) and the largest private landowner. Roughly half of our property is in working forests sloping up from the wetlands. This provides a rare opportunity to connect wetlands to a working forest and demonstrate the potential for best management practices in private forestry.

**Strategies for WLT to pursue:**

- Land acquisition, trades and exchanges of wetlands to restore natural processes.
- Acquire conservation easements primarily for the surrounding working landscape to preserve open space and prevent further fragmentation of ownership and development in this relatively undeveloped landscape.
- Pursue wetland mitigation projects that may be required for highway, rail and pipeline impacts during future upgrades or expansions.
Upper South Fork Nooksack and Major Tributaries

Due to the reliance on outside sources for data, no warranty for the accuracy of data!
Boundaries are approximate!

Map Legend
- Upper South Fork Boundary
- Private Timber
- U.S. Forest Service
- WLT Conserved Lands
- WA State DNR
- Other Protected Lands
- Priority Salmon Habitat
- County Boundary
- Major Road

Skookum Creek Fish Hatchery

NORTH

Whatcom County

Skagit County

Upper South Fork Nooksack R.
IV. Project Selection

A well-defined process along with established criteria for selecting projects allows WLT to find a balance between being strategic and being opportunistic. By focusing on its strategic priorities, WLT can protect more significant lands. The project selection, evaluation and approval process guides and focuses the Board’s deliberations on important issues, including public benefit and project risks. This process is used when considering which projects to undertake.

When a landowner or other interested party approaches WLT about a property, the appropriate staff or Board Member will initiate a discussion on the phone with the person, then review pertinent maps and other available information. If the project appears to meet WLT’s objectives, staff will arrange a field visit with the landowner. Then if the property is of interest to WLT, staff will gather more information on the project, put together maps and a project prospectus and bring the Lands Committee out to the site. The Lands Committee, using WLT’s Project Selection Criteria, ranks the project and submits its recommendation to the Board of Directors for approval.

Project Selection Criteria:

Selection criteria are WLT’s written description of the characteristics or minimum standards that qualify conservation projects to be considered for protection. Criteria establish whether a project is eligible for consideration, but do not guarantee that WLT will take on the project. These criteria are used to screen projects offered to WLT and target properties to pursue. In both cases, the criteria provide a critical tool for determining which transactions are appropriate and worthwhile to undertake and which are not. The Lands Committee and Board members can use their best judgment and discretion, and should use the selection criteria and ranking system as useful tools to guide informed decision-making.

WLT will give highest priority to properties that advance its mission, strategic focal areas and specific land protection goals found in WLT’s Strategic Plan 2013-2018.

WLT will give priority to properties that:

- Possess high quality ecological values and functions, or with relative ease can be restored to such a condition.
- If working land, provide the best conditions for long-term resource use.
- Have significant or unique property characteristics recognized by local, state or federal agencies or credible natural resource organizations.
- Possess important fish and/or wildlife habitat.
- Are located within a strategic Focal Area or form an important ecological connection to a Focal Area(s).
- Contribute to landscape integrity such as ecological systems (for example: migratory or connectivity corridors). In the case of working lands, priority will be given to properties that are adjacent to other protected working lands.
- Have unique or inherent physical characteristics and conservation values imminently threatened by development pressure, especially where irreversible conversion of the property seems highly likely.
- Can be effectively stewarded by WLT or another conservation entity in the long-term.
• Will require minimal costs (time and money) incurred by WLT.
• Provide appropriate public use opportunities, such as low-impact recreation and environmental education, without damaging conservation or resource values.
• Meet multiple WLT objectives, including appropriately raising our profile (to attract new members, increase giving levels, or increase our credibility) and involving partnerships and unique collaborations.
V. Prioritization of Projects

Because there are always more worthy conservation projects than WLT has resources to accommodate, WLT uses a tier system to help manage its conservation opportunities. The projects listed in the Potential Project Table are ranked by the following planning tiers.

Planning Tiers

The planning tiers balance priorities, available resources and opportunities. Projects that meet all criteria are the highest priority. Projects that have a high priority may need proactive relationship building to create opportunity (i.e. landowner willingness to sell or donate land) or funding sources may need to be secured to move a project “up the list.”

Tier 1 Projects

Most active, highest priority projects. All have willing landowners, impending deadlines, and secured funding. For projects which are donations, or funding is partially secured, deadlines are based on threat of loss of landowner interest, or restoration planning is underway.

Tier 3A & B Projects

High Priority, non-active projects. Land Trust has made at least initial contact with owners of Tier 3A Projects; Tier 3B Projects need relationship establishment and building. Funding has not been secured for these projects. There are no immediate deadlines.

Tier 2 Projects

High priority projects, moderately active. All have willing landowners and funding as been partially secured / and or likely funding sources have been identified with upcoming grant applications deadlines.

Tier 4A & B Projects

Lower Priority, non-active projects. Land Trust has made initial contact with landowners of Tier 4A; Tier 4B projects still need relationship establishment and building. Funding has not been secured for these projects and there are no immediate deadlines.
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VI. Appendices

Appendix A. Land Conservation Plan - Goals and Objectives

**WLT's Goals to Achieve Strategic Mission:**

WLT advances our strategic mission through land protection, stewardship and community engagement.

**Land Protection** – The Land Trust protects high priority lands for Whatcom County in perpetuity.

Goal 1: Achieve multiple conservation objectives by protecting and restoring natural and working lands of regional and local significance.

Goal 2: Prioritize conservation at a large landscape scale in focal areas:

Goal 3: Acquire conservation interests and protect the most important lands in defined priority areas.

Goal 4: Advocate for public policies and funding programs that expand land protection and stewardship actions in priority landscapes.

**Stewardship** – Land Trust properties and easements are responsibly managed in perpetuity.

Goal 5: Manage all Land Trust fee lands according to approved stewardship plans.

Goal 6: Collaborate with conservation easement landowners to ensure compliance.

**Community Engagement** – Evolve WLT as a recognized community leader in conservation.

Goal 7: Increase our engagement of supporters, volunteers and partners.

Goal 8: Increase the number and diversity of citizens actively engaged in conservation in Whatcom County.

Goal 9: Coordinate WLT’s positions on select public policy issues that directly impact WLT properties or our conservation mission, and advocate for policy and programs directly that advance the Land Trust’s land protection and stewardship goals and objectives.
**Objectives: The following objectives are specific tasks to be undertaken and completed by WLT to achieve its above stated goals.**

Objective 1: Keep focal area maps updated with current resource information and changes in land use and ownership.

Objective 2: Using project selection criteria, determine the highest priority lands for protection, identify possible funding sources, and initiate conversations with landowners to advance conservation.

Objective 3: Over a 6-year period, complete 25-35 transactions that protect close to 10,000 acres of high priority lands with a mix of conservation targets.

Objective 4: Develop and complete stewardship plans for all fee-owned land within one year of acquisition and implement the plans. Update plans every five years or as new adjacent lands are acquired.

Objective 5: Monitor all conservation easements annually for compliance and maintain positive, proactive relationships with owners of these lands.

Objective 6: Partner with community organizations, public agencies and private individuals to protect high priority lands.

Objective 7: Keep project selection criteria current and apply to all potential projects to ensure that preference is given to projects:

(a) that add significant value to the protection of healthy, ecologically viable landscapes;
(b) where the conservation values are threatened with loss or damage;
(c) that do not require significant stewardship efforts, unless adequate funding is available and any stewardship and restoration efforts will lead to significant ecological benefit;
(d) that achieve more conservation with less direct resource cost to the Land Trust; and
(e) that protect multiple conservation targets.
1. Vulnerability, Threat, & Future Risk

Like most places on Earth, the natural features and working lands of Whatcom County face many threats. The following summarizes the leading current and likely future human and natural threats to WLT’s conservation targets.

Fragmentation – The division of formerly contiguous natural features or working landscapes into smaller units that are isolated from each other.

Land Conversion to Residential, Commercial, and Industrial Development and Road Building – Population growth drives pressures associated with expansion of urban development that can have serious negative impacts on both the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems in the region, as well as the viability of working resource landscapes.

Disruption of Natural Processes – Natural disturbances such as fire, flooding, windstorms, and outbreaks of disease play an important role in the patterns of abundance, distribution and species composition of ecosystems. Human disruption of natural processes such as fire and floods has had far-reaching impacts on species and ecosystems in our region. Riparian and floodplain systems have been impacted by levees, bank armoring, flow management, agricultural and urban development, and channelization of rivers.

Pollution and Degradation to Aquatic Integrity – Sedimentation from logging, farming and mining, land disturbance, runoff of herbicides and pesticides, water diversion and barriers all contribute to degrading aquatic habitats.

Logging - Management goals, objectives and actions differ between public, larger and smaller private timber interests. Many are managed in ways that will not adequately sustain native biodiversity over the long term. Plantations managed with relatively short rotations provide little structural, temporal and species diversity over a fairly large landscape. Roads, lack of diversity, lack of watershed hydrologic maturity, changing ownership and management impact aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems.

Farming – Many common farming practices have the potential to degrade aquatic habitats and negatively affect water quality. Impacts include sedimentation from land disturbance and runoff of herbicides and pesticides from agricultural drainage. In addition, irrigation and flood abatement infrastructure such as channels, levees, and bank armoring can diminish the health of aquatic habitats.

Mining – Adversely impacts the landscape by permanently altering the surface and subsurface and may result in pollution to aquatic systems. Gold panning can adversely impact spawning and rearing salmon habitats.

Invasive Species & Exotic Species - Numerous invasive species occur throughout the region with serious ecological consequences including the elimination of native species and the alteration of natural function.

Climate Change - Climate change affects every aspect of the natural environment and each of these impacts often cause changes that affect other aspects of the environment, essentially producing a chain-reaction of changes within the ecosystem. As the effects of climate change progress, it may become difficult or impossible to maintain historic conditions in a given area. In particular, fires, floods and storms are expected to become more frequent and extreme. Washington is expected to have warmer weather and altered
precipitation patterns - wetter in the winter and drier in the summer. Change in the timing of water will alter ecological relationships affecting both larger natural systems and many individual species, thus creating conflict between natural and working landscapes.

Recreation - Increasing demand and opportunities for outdoor recreation is becoming an important conservation issue throughout the US, and many recreational activities, such as ORV use, unregulated trail building, off trail use, fires, target shooting, poaching, hunting and gold panning, can and do impact specific conservation values.

2. Layers of Land Protection
There is a gradient to the layers of conservation in a landscape scaling from permanent legal protections to temporary legal conservation to at-will or voluntary conservation by a landowner where no legal agreement exists. A property's protective status is often dictated by its ownership type, size, configuration, ecological and economic value, environmental regulations, and local zoning. It is vital that WLT understand the existing and projected future layers of protection and land uses to determine its conservation niche and, therefore, where WLT’s resources are best deployed to complement the conservation work of other entities. As a point of reference, note that less than one percent of Whatcom County has been protected through permanent Land Trust conservation by WLT, Lummi Island Heritage Trust, and The Nature Conservancy.

a. Permanent and Temporary Conservation Tools
The following illustrates the leading methods to legally secure conservation of land and water resources:

Conservation Easement – perpetual to protect conservation value; can only be extinguished by judicial proceedings (can be either a voluntary or regulatory requirement)

Fee Title – property owned and managed by a conservation organization or governmental entity often with a deed restriction or conservation easement held by another entity to guarantee permanent protection.

Temporary or term easement or conservation lease – conservation easement or agreement for a set period of years (less than permanent). Leading government programs employing term easements or leases include Forest Riparian Enhancement Program (FREP), Riparian Open Space Program (RSOP), Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), or long-term aquatic lease of tidelands.

b. Local and State Regulatory Protections for Resource Lands
Commercial Forestry Zone – intends to protect forest resource lands which are primarily used for growing trees for commercial purposes. Whatcom County has 223,600 acres zoned Commercial Forestry. No development is permitted and the minimum lot size is 40 acres.

Agricultural Zone – intends to protect and enhance Whatcom County’s agricultural land base for the continued production of food and fiber. Approximately 84,065 acres in Whatcom County is zoned Agriculture. New parcels may not be created less than 40 acres. Many non-conforming lots exist and the current average lot size is 17 acres. Estimated 2,000 development rights remain in the Agricultural Zone.
c. State and Local Regulations – Critical Areas Ordinance and Shoreline Management Program

3. Strategies – Conservation Toolbox
WLT has a variety of conservation tools at its disposal. Tool selection will be dictated by the significance of the conservation value of a project, the level of risk, the most appropriate strategy, timing/urgency to act, and opportunity.

Fee Title Acquisition – The Land Trust will acquire the property in its entirety and retain full ownership and manage it for its conservation purpose.

Life Estate – Fee title ownership subject to a life estate. Owner retains right to live on land for remainder of lifetime and may have use of all or a portion of the property.

Conservation Easement – Perpetual legal agreement to protect certain conservation values by restricting certain uses that threaten the conservation values.

Transfer or Purchase of Development Rights – Usually involves protecting with a conservation easement often to protect working lands like farms and forests.

Transfer – The Land Trust may be on the chain of title for a property, and will transfer its rights to another agency such as City, County or State parks. Often the Land Trust retains a conservation easement prior to the transfer of ownership.

Facilitation and Cooperation – The Land Trust works with another entity to help protect the land and will not have rights to the property or be listed on the chain of title.

Trades and Exchanges – The Land Trust works with possibly multiple entities to help protect land by consolidating and reconfiguring ownership pattern. Land Trust will most likely not have rights to the property or be listed on the chain of title.

Restoration – Efforts that will lead to significant ecological benefits and are important to the protection of conservation values of a site.

Advocacy - The Land Trust works to influence public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions. Advocacy can include many activities that a person or organization undertakes including media campaigns, public speaking, commissioning and publishing research, and educating individuals to achieve desired conservation and stewardship outcomes. WLT needs to develop a targeted advocacy policy. Development of an advocacy policy is identified within WLT’s Strategic Plan and is scheduled to be advanced in the 2015-2016 Work Plan.