

WORKING GROUP GETS FIRST HAND LOOK AT WDFW'S WEST ROCKY PRAIRIE

The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife recently completed the purchase of West Rocky Prairie, a dream more than 10 years in the making. It began when the very first South Sound Prairie Landscape Working Group took a little driving tour of local prairies. West Rocky was spotted out the window of the car and they pulled over to check it out. The site was formerly known as the Pacific Powder Plant and had recently been owned by Citifor.



Ten years later, over 800 acres of rare prairie habitat, complete with oak woodland, and wetlands come under the wing of conservationists.

On March 29th the South Sound Prairie Landscape Working Group, now a much larger group, got a chance to take a look at the new property.

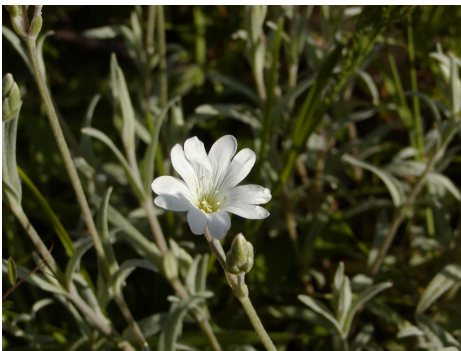
“The sun is shining and it’s a great opportunity to see what’s here and what might be possible,” said Mason McKinley, a project manager for The Nature Conservancy. “There’s so little prairie left, it’s just heartening to be able to look around such a large remnant.”

“It’s really a blank slate in a lot of ways,” says Kelly McAllister, biologist for WDFW. “We know that, historically, there was a lot here – most of the rare, prairie-associated butterflies, for example. And I’ve seen a number of Oregon spotted frogs down in the wetland. There’s also some water Howellia (a plant listed as federally threatened). We really don’t have complete knowledge of what’s out here using this habitat now, but everyone’s really excited about the possibilities.”

In fact the site is much bigger, consisting of about 1,600 acres. Much of the property has been in commercial use for some time and at this point, the remaining property is slated for use as a gravel mine.

“Of course, there was a lot of concern and a lot of negotiating took place about the possible effects of the mining on the land that we purchased for conservation,” Kelly adds.

“The truth is, no one is really sure what effect, if any, there might be, but working through the issues and settling on a plan for the future is one of the reasons that acquisition of this land took ten years to accomplish..”



There are lots of possibilities for the site, one of the biggest remaining prairie landscapes in western Washington. This is true not only in terms of conservation and restoration, but for education as well. In the years to come, the agency plans to control exotic

plants on the prairie and, to the extent possible, restore or enhance populations of state listed and candidate species, such as the mardon skipper butterfly and Oregon spotted frog. With proper care, the public will have the opportunity to view a remnant of prairie and oak woodland habitat that resembles the vanishing community of plants and animals that was once extensive in the south Puget Sound region. Of course, intensive public use won't be allowed, but the intent is to eventually develop an interpretive trail – access that allows for public enjoyment and education without impeding conservation.

Acquisition was made possible by the cooperation of many individuals and groups including, notably, The Nature Conservancy, Washington State Audubon, Capitol Land Trust, Black Hills Audubon, and J Allen.