

# Executive Summary

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## Charting a More Secure Future for Oak and Prairie Habitats



Prepared by

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Oak and Prairie Working Group

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Over the next 10 years, what will happen to our oak and prairie habitats?

In the greater Portland-Vancouver region, oak and prairie ecosystems provide core habitat for hundreds of plant and wildlife species. They serve as the cultural bedrock for Native American communities and are a strikingly beautiful component of our region’s natural heritage. Yet they also are among the most threatened habitat types in the United States. Without a concerted, well-organized effort to stem the tide of their decline, during the next decades these ecosystems risk becoming little more than isolated museum pieces.

Locally, oak and prairie habitats exist in numerous but increasingly disconnected fragments, many of them privately owned. They no longer benefit from historical disturbance regimes (e.g., fire). They are threatened by ongoing urbanization, agricultural activities, and invasive species, as well as new threats associated with climate change. And they lag behind our more iconic landscapes, such as salmon-bearing rivers and old-growth forests, in attracting the scientific study, public interest, and policy-maker support that are crucial in charting a more secure ecological future.

The latter, at least, is beginning to change. Increasingly, public agencies<sup>1</sup> are acknowledging the importance of intact, connected oak and prairie habitats to a healthy regional ecosystem, and local nonprofit organizations<sup>2</sup> are including oak and prairie habitats as a focus of their strategic conservation activities.

Since 2012, The Intertwine Alliance’s Oak Prairie Working Group (OPWG) has been collaborating to address the need for better science, stewardship, restoration, and education to improve the ecological future of oak and prairie habitats in the greater Portland-Vancouver region. This strategic action plan is one outcome of the OPWG’s work.<sup>3</sup> It will guide the OPWG during the next 10 years as the group (1) completes crucial mapping of native oak trees in the greater Portland-Vancouver region, (2) compiles existing knowledge of local oak and prairie habitats, and (3) advances conservation science, stewardship, and education related to the area’s imperiled native oak and prairie ecosystems.

The strategic action plan organizes priority actions, subactions, tasks, responsible parties, estimated costs, timeframes, and expected outcomes around five interrelated strategy elements that, together, address key components of oak and prairie conservation:

A. **Spatial data:** Develop spatial data to empower better, data-driven conservation decision-making.

**Oak and prairie ecosystems** play a vital role in the ecology of the Pacific Northwest by providing habitat and food for hundreds of plant and animal species—from diminutive butterflies, ferns, and lilies to magnificent Ponderosa pines, madrone trees, and elk. Many oak- and prairie-dependent species are threatened or endangered, and some of these, like *Delphinium leucophaeum* (white rock larkspur) and *Icariacia icariodes fenderi* (Fender’s blue butterfly), are found nowhere else in the world.

<sup>1</sup> See the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife’s statewide [Oregon Conservation Strategy](#) (2015), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s [Willamette Valley Conservation Study](#) (2017), Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) grants from 2017, and the City of Portland’s [Terrestrial Ecology Enhancement Strategy](#) (2011).

<sup>2</sup> See The Intertwine Alliance’s [Regional Conservation Strategy and Biodiversity Guide](#), Columbia Land Trust’s [25-Year Conservation Agenda](#), and the Willamette Partnership’s [Oak Accord](#).

<sup>3</sup> For others, see p. 2 of the strategic action plan.

- B. **Land conservation:** Conserve land to protect habitat for declining species and prevent the decline of common species.
- C. **Active stewardship:** Practice active stewardship to improve the quality of existing habitat and fill connectivity gaps by creating new habitat.
- D. **Knowledge:** Develop knowledge and management guidance documents to improve and support on-the-ground stewardship and landscape-scale conservation.
- E. **Community education, engagement, and advocacy:** Educate and engage stakeholders to raise awareness and appreciation of these habitats and increase conservation efforts by both organizations and individuals.

The collaboration that has gone into developing this plan will serve as a solid foundation as OPWG

**The Intertwine Alliance’s  
Oak Prairie Working Group  
(OPWG)**

formed in 2012 and now consists of more than 30 agency, nonprofit, and community partners who are collaborating to improve the conservation of local oak and prairie habitats. Partners represent fish and wildlife agencies, Native American tribes, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, park districts, cities, land trusts, watershed councils, environmental nonprofits, and community-based organizations, such as neighborhood associations.

partners begin scaling up local oak and prairie conservation from the individual site level to the larger, more ecologically significant regional level. Along the way, we can ensure that our activities build on others’ efforts in the Pacific Northwest but are tailored to local conditions and challenges. We also can bring a broad range of people into the circle of activities that will support conservation of these important ecosystems.

Consistent with the OPWG’s collaborative nature, every action in the strategic action plan will require the combined efforts of multiple partners. Not all partners will participate in every action; instead, partners will contribute consistent with their organizational capacity and mission. Also essential will be consistent, strategic communications that make oak and prairie habitats and the conservation measures they need more visible in the public eye, as well as with specific audiences. Additionally, because habitats, management approaches, and priorities are fragmented throughout the region, OPWG partners will need to work with both public and private landowners, across the urban-to-rural land use spectrum, and adapt existing tools and approaches so that they can be applied across scales, land use settings, and audiences. The actions identified in the strategic plan are designed to support all three of these areas: collaboration, communication, and connection with

people throughout our region.

Success will not come easily. Restoring oak and prairie ecosystems in the greater Portland-Vancouver region will require a concerted, coordinated, and well-funded effort, at multiple geographic scales, that addresses a range of ecological, social, and economic barriers. But the potential rewards are great. Our activities will go beyond improving the health and survival of just our local oak and prairie ecosystems. Given our location between the northern Willamette Valley and southern Puget Trough, our efforts will contribute to the long-term, large-scale conservation of oak and prairie habitats across their range in the Pacific Northwest, from northwest California to British Columbia.

Having healthy oak and prairie habitats across the Pacific Northwest definitely is a goal worth working toward.