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Lands Manager

1007 W. 3rd Ave
Suite 302
Anchorage, AK 99501
Tel (907) 278-4998
Fax (907) 278-4997
www.greatlandtrust.org



March 18th 2013

David Wigglesworth
Coastal Program Manager - Southcentral AK
US Fish & Wildlife Service
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite G-61
Anchorage, AK 99501

Re: Final Report 6/30/2011-11/1/2012

USFWS Agreement # J0181BJ035
NFHAP O'Brien Creek
Project Title: NFHAP—O'Brien Creek Estuary Conservation Project

Dear Mr. Wigglesworth:

This provides the final report for Great Land Trust 2011 NFHAP proposal entitled "NFHAP—O'Brien Creek Estuary Conservation Project" pursuant to the award agreement between USFWS and the Trust, dated July 14, 2011.

This report reflects activity for the term of the grant 6/30/2011-11/1/2012

Project Objectives:

- To gather necessary data on the riparian and estuarine habitat provided by this conservation project. **Complete as evidenced by the fieldwork and photo documentation necessary to complete the conservation easement and baseline documentation report.**
- To complete a baseline assessment of the parcel documenting the flora, fauna, unique natural features, and detailing the historical and current uses of the parcel. **Completed see attached report**
- To further document the Coho usage of O'Brien Creek for migration, spawning and rearing. **Completed see attached report**
- To perform a phase 1 environmental review on the parcel to determine that the conservation values of this parcel have not been compromised by past activities. **Completed see the attached Phase 1 report.**
- With match funding complete the appraisal, title search, legal review and conservation easement for the parcel to permanently protect the O'Brien Creek estuary, 25 acres of coastal wetlands and intertidal mudflats and 260 feet of the creeks for the benefit of Coho salmon. **Completed see attached appraisal, title, and recorded conservation easement.**

Sincerely,

Phil Shephard
Executive Director

O'Brien Creek Estuary Conservation Project



Photo: O'Brien Creek Estuary 2012

Final Report:

We are happy to report that this project, with the support of NFHAP funding, to conserve a historic homestead near the Native town site of Knik, and 30 acres along O'Brien creek estuary is complete. On March 7th, 2013 we met with the family to sign the final closing documents. Over the past three years we worked extensively with the five family members to understand the historic and ecological values of their property and helped them design a conservation easement that both ensures a legacy for their family and permanently protects this biologically rich estuarine area.

The O'Brien Creek Property is owned by the Harbeson family. The Harbesons homesteaded the Parcel in 1960's. The property lies on the northeastern banks of Knik Arm and at the mouth of O'Brien Creek (see Attachments A and B). The Harbesons were contacted by Great Land Trust after the parcel ranked 172nd out of 17,000 parcels in 2009 prioritization of Knik Arm Parcels. In 2010 the Harbeson family and Great Land Trust began work to document the conservation values and establish a conservation easement on the Property.

Due Diligence Reports Completed with NFHAP funding:

In the grant proposal we proposed to use NFHAP funding to support staff time to manage the project, completed the baseline documentation report, phase one environmental hazard report, partial appraisal and to complete a habitat assessment on O'Brien creek. We were able to complete each of these deliverables during the project period. Each of these documents is attached.

Match Funding

We were able to secure the match funding necessary to complete the other due diligence aspects of the project listed in the project objectives including the title report, appraisal, legal review and draft the conservation easement. We were awarded 73,000.00 from the National Fish and Wildlife Fund (NFWF) these funds are not considered match but part of the overall budget. We were also awarded a contract with the Matanuska Susitna Borough (MSB) to assist landowners in covering the costs of the conservation easements. \$39,720.00 from the MSB contract will be used toward match as well as \$10,000.00 from the Bullitt Foundation and \$5280.00 from Great Land Trust. Please see attached award letter from NFWF, Bullitt, and the contract from the MSB to serve as match documentation back up.

Below is a summary of the ecological and wildlife values conserved by the conservation easement on the O'Brien Creek Estuary Property

Birds

O'Brien Creek is located 4 miles away from Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge and is 7.5 miles from Goose Bay State Game Refuge which are both defined by The Audubon Society as Important Bird Areas. Estuaries in Upper Cook Inlet provide important habitat as migration stopovers and nesting areas. Habitat on this parcel is similar to Palmer Hay Flats Refuge, which provides feeding, nesting, and migratory habitat for more than 169 species of waterfowl, shorebirds, and other migratory birds, including nesting bald eagles, trumpeter swans, snow geese, peregrine falcons, the rusty black bird, and many species of waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and neotropical migrants.

Aquatic Habitat and Salmon

The O'Brien Creek Estuary like most estuaries in Cook Inlet is very productive for juvenile salmon. These estuarine habitats provide a refuge from predators, a place to feed on both marine and riverine prey and play an important role in the coupling of salmonid life cycle activities. A survey done on fish populations in the mouth of O'Brien Creek found Juvenile Coho Salmon, Sculpin, and several species of stickleback. There's indicated that in the early spring O'Brien Creek is important to the migration of salmon smolt. Conserving the estuary protects habitat important to salmon life cycles and populations in Upper Knik Arm.

Beluga

The property is within the designated critical habitat area for the Cook Inlet Beluga Whale, which is listed as endangered (73FR 62919, October 22, 2008) under the Endangered Species Act. The Harbeson family reported observing Beluga feeding just off shore and swimming up the narrow mouth of O'Brien Creek in pursuit of salmon.

Other Mammals

Large mammals that use this habitat include moose, coyotes, and black and brown bears. Other mammals include muskrat, red squirrel, ermine, snowshoe hare, river otters, lynx, porcupines, red foxes, wolverines, red-backed vole, and masked shrew. With habitat loss, fragmentation and development, occurring in the Mat-Su area, the conservation of relatively intact natural habitat is critical to continued ecological functioning in the area.

Vegetation- wetlands

The property includes an extensive wetland between the bluff and O'Brien Creek. This marsh is fed by both fresh water from the bluff and salt water from high tides. Dense sedges and grasses are rooted in saturated mud, which is easily damaged. The marsh and its productive plant life are host to a high diversity of birds, small mammals, and invertebrates.

The property consists of Estuarine Intertidal emergent wetlands, which are specifically defined as a “declining wetland community” by the National Wetlands Conservation Plan developed under Section 301 of the Emergency Wetland Resources Act.

Scenic Resources/Open Space Values

Scenic Resources of this property will be protected by this Conservation Easement. The property is visible from the Knik-Goose Bay Rd., Birchwood Airport, Beach Lake Park, Chugach State Park, and Palmer Hay Flats State Game Refuge.

Supporting Plans

The Matanuska-Susitna Basin Salmon Habitat Partnership formed to address increasing impacts on salmon from human use and development in the Mat-Su Basin with a collaborative, cooperative and non-regulatory approach that brings together diverse stakeholders. The Strategic Action Plan of the Mat-Su Basin Salmon Habitat Partnership was created to prioritize projects related to the fish habitat goals in the Mat-Su Basin. The Conservation Easement is consistent with the top priorities of the Mat-Su Basin Salmon Habitat Partnership. The Conservation Easement is consistent with the following components of the Salmon Habitat Partnership’s strategic plan:

Objective 2.2 Protection of Priority Salmon Riparian Habitat. By 2015, secure long-term protective status (e.g., conservation easements, designated parks, land acquisition) of at least 10% of priority riparian habitats that have not been significantly altered.

Strategic Action 2.2.5: Protect Riparian Areas with Easements. Protect riparian habitat important to salmon through voluntary conservation easements and/ or fee acquisition from willing sellers.

Objective 3.1 Conserve Wetlands For Salmon.

Strategic Action 3.1.3 Protect Wetlands with Easements. Protect Wetlands important to salmon through voluntary conservation easements and/ or fee acquisition from willing sellers.

Strategic Action 4.1.4: Implement Green Infrastructure. Work with land management planning processes to include Green Infrastructure principles to direct development of impervious surfaces away from waterbodies.

Additionally, the property consists of Estuarine Intertidal emergent wetlands, which are specifically defined as a “declining wetland community” by the National Wetlands Conservation Plan developed under Section 301 of the Emergency Wetland Resources Act.

Historical, Cultural or Archeological Values of the property

According to Shem Pete’s Alaska the Athabascan name for O’Brien Creek is Ch’ak’dinlet; meaning where the current flows. Mat-Su Borough Archaeologists have indicated that there are likely Athabascan caches on the property (see Attachment E). Just upstream from the property was the location of many Athabascan dwellings. The mouth of O’Brien Creek was important as an area to replenish food as the Athabascans moved to these villages upstream and along the coast. The Property is less than a mile away from the old Knik Townsite. This was one of the first major trading posts between Euro-Americans and the Den’aina in Upper Cook Inlet.

Supporting Documentation Attached: Recorded Conservation Easement and Final sf425.