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The Oregon Water Trust [abstract]

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The Oregon Water Trust

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Andrew Purkey is OWT's founding executive director. Andrew grew up in Eugene, Oregon and graduated from the University of Oregon in 1986. He worked in both the Oregon State Legislature and the United States Congress before attending Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He earned a master's degree, with a concentration in natural resources policy, from the Kennedy School in 1989. Prior to returning to Oregon, Andrew worked for a Washington, DC-based environmental consulting firm for three years, The Nature Conservancy for a year, and as the coordinator of the Great Outdoors Colorado initiative campaign in 1992.

ABSTRACT

The Oregon Water Trust (OWT), modeled after successful land trusts, was founded in 1993 to buy water for fish. OWT's mission is to "acquire water rights through gift, lease or purchase and commit these rights under Oregon law to instream flows in order to conserve fisheries and aquatic habitat and to enhance the recreational values and the ecological health of water courses." OWT acquires existing, senior water rights - and when we purchase the oldest right on a stream the first water in the stream belongs to the fish, providing critical habitat during the late summer and early fall. OWT is the first ever water trust in the United States, and possibly the world. There are now similar water trusts emerging throughout the west, including in Colorado, Montana and Washington.

OWT is developing new partnerships with Oregon's watershed councils, landowners, and other organizations to restore stream flows through a market based approach. These partnerships are being forged with the help of a new tool: water acquisitions. Water acquisitions are becoming an important method for improving water quality and providing water for fish in Oregon, and all across the West. This paper will discuss the opportunities and obstacles that have arisen and lessons learned in pioneering implementation of this new tool in a market setting.

OWT's Board of Directors includes people who represent agricultural, tribal, environmental and water policy interests, who share a commitment to using a voluntary, free market approach to protecting instream flows under Oregon water law. OWT approaches its work based on science - focusing on small tributaries where returning even a small amount of

water to the stream creates significant ecological benefits. OWT takes a cooperative and collaborative approach, working with water rights holders, local watershed councils, agency officials and communities.

OWT has made substantial strides in completing water acquisitions since negotiating four one-year leases in 1994. During the 2001 irrigation season, OWT was able to restore nearly 102 cubic feet per second of flow through agreements with 85 water right holders. These totals represent a significant increase from our work in past irrigation seasons. Included in this total were a number of drought response leases that allowed us to restore streamflows on selected streams that were severely threatened by the dry conditions this past summer.

OWT acquires water rights through lease, purchase and donation, and works with landowners to craft projects that create win-win solutions for farmers and fish. While some projects involve fallowing land, in many projects OWT assists with changes in water use and management that increase instream flows while continuing agricultural production. Examples include conserved water projects, point of diversion changes, source switching, split season leasing and rotational pooling agreements.