

Baseline Characteristics:

HABITAT CONSERVATION

Idaho as a State, is ranked as the 14th largest in the Country by land area and 3rd highest in its percentage of federally protected land.^{48,49} Nearly two thirds of the State of Idaho is public lands— approximately 62% is federally owned and managed.⁵⁰ Another four percent is made up

of State endowment trust lands.⁵¹ Out of all the states, Idaho ranks 38th in the nation for its total population of nearly 2 million.⁵² This equation makes Idaho the 6th least densely populated state in the nation, Idaho is home to approximately 22.3 people per square mile.⁵³

Between 2010-2015, Idaho's population gradually increased.

Between 2016-2019 the state's rate of population growth doubled on average.⁵⁴ Then, in concert with the start of the COVID pandemic, the State's average rate of population growth reached unprecedented highs.⁵⁵ Population trends— as well as patterns of development⁵⁶—have compromised open space, increased loss of agricultural lands and espoused a sense of unwanted change in rural communities in Idaho.⁵⁷ Blaine County is no exception, residents surveyed by the Wood River Land Trust pointed to habitat conservation—including protections for open space, wildlife and watersheds—as a community priority, in need of attention.⁵⁸

"When/If Idaho communities once again face rapid rates of population growth, pressures on Idaho's valuable agricultural land and natural resources will increase,"

write Stephanie Witt and Carole Nemnich, authors of a 2011 Boise State University Public Policy Center study on land use practices in the state. "Effective land use planning will play a critical role in shaping the design of our built environments."⁵⁹

The physical geography of Blaine County funnels development into the valley floor, along the Big Wood River corridor. More than 80% of the county is public land, spanning the mountainous terrain to the north, east, and west; as well as the lava fields to the south. Nearly all of the County's public land is federal, managed by the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, Idaho Department of Lands, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the Bureau of Reclamation and National Park Service.⁶⁰ Even more is protected by non-profit conservation efforts and zoning for agriculture, hillside protection and recreation.⁶¹

What is at risk? Development in the floodplain impacts riparian habitats, the side canyons are subject to sprawling development and prime farmland is forced to compete with a valuable housing market. Buildable areas overlap with the scarce sage grouse habitat in the sagebrush steppe,⁶² which by now have lost half of their historic range.⁶³ Big game migration routes encompass the valley, crossing State Highway 75 north of Ketchum and U.S. Highway 20 near Stanton's Crossing, Timmerman Junction, and Fish Creek.⁶⁴ Between Hailey and Ketchum, resident deer and elk populations meander across SH75 to access the river and forage in their winter range.⁶⁵ Subdivisions overlap with the Big Wood River's floodplain up and down its length,⁶⁶ as well as prime farmland in the Bellevue triangle and Little Wood River drainage and subarea.⁶⁷

Blaine County's community and built environment are invariably connected to the conditions of the surrounding sagebrush steppe, forests and waterways. Natural hazards, posed by wildfires, avalanches, and floods don't heed jurisdictional boundaries. While a variety of local entities respond to natural disasters, coordinated and proactive

planning across the community and region can further mitigate risks. Coalitions of conservation, restoration and outdoor recreation groups engage federal and state agencies to steward open spaces. Managing development in the Wildland-Urban Interface becomes especially critical as climate change pushes us into new fire regimes and unpredictable flooding events.⁶⁸

Unlike many other states that take active roles in managing and moderating growth, Idaho does not have a state agency dedicated to growth management. Passed in 1975, Idaho's Local Land Use Planning Act requires cities and counties to draft their own comprehensive plans to guide development but offers little in the way of statewide support or technical assistance for sustainable growth.⁶⁹ As such, interjurisdictional cooperation is essential to shaping sustainable development and actualizing regional sustainability goals.⁷⁰

Transfer of Development Rights Program

One tool that Blaine County leverages to manage its growth is a transfer of development rights (TDR) program. The program allows landowners to sell and transfer the development rights associated with a parcel of land in a sending area, to another in a receiving area. Designated sending and receiving areas traditionally direct development into cities and conserve open space in rural areas.⁷¹ After more than a decade idle, Blaine County's program saw transactions in 2021⁷² and 2023.⁷³

The County's program is limited by several factors known to bolster other programs.⁷⁴ Firstly, there is no communications hub to connect potential sellers and buyers. Secondly, the sending and receiving areas are both in the County; the program is not interjurisdictional. Participants cannot apply TDRs within city limits, where infill and density is most appropriate. Thirdly, the program lacks a bank or fiduciary agent that can facilitate transactions or stimulate activity when there is a lull.

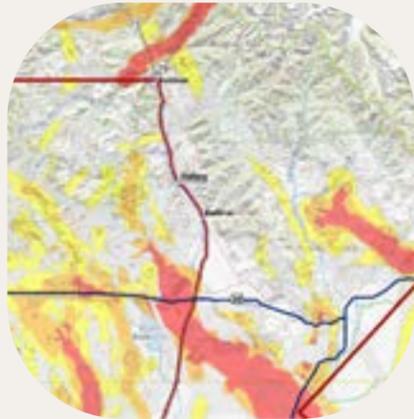
A Boise state study suggests that "antigrowth sentiment in the area" and aversion to increased density in downtown cores limits the effectiveness of the TDR program and may inadvertently encourage sprawl outside urban centers, or promote the development of unprotected land near but not inside receiving areas.⁷⁵ Though these confines limit the efficacy of the program in its current form, there is potential of a revamped program. A 2023 study estimates that an expanded program could shift nearly 6,000 units out of the County, into city boundaries—conserving more than 56,000 acres in sending areas.⁷⁶ Beyond habitat conservation, compact development poses benefits to all five of the Land Trust's community planning focus areas.



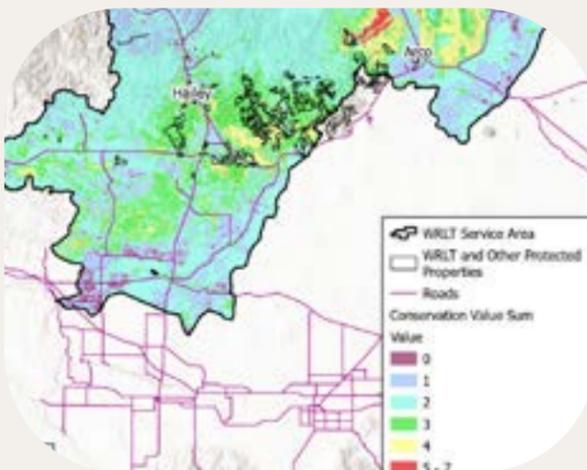
Erosion⁸²



Rip Rap⁸³



Big Game Migration⁷⁸



WRLT Conservation Priorities by Value Sum⁷⁹

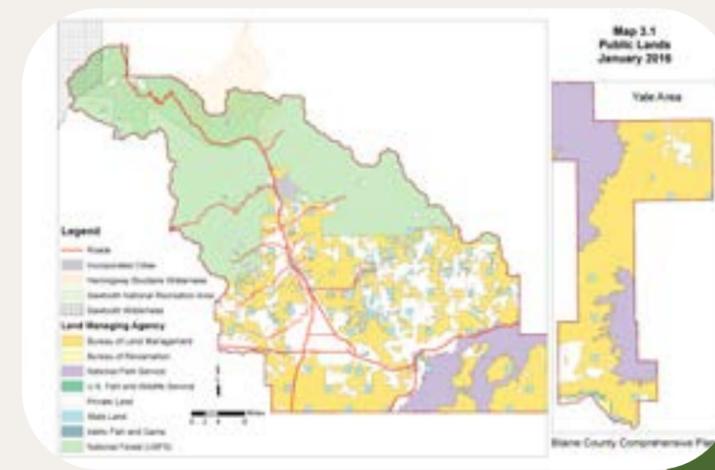
Local Species of Concern

Of the endangered, threatened and sensitive species listed by Idaho's Department of Fish and Game as the "Species of Greatest Conservation & Information Need,"⁷⁷ Blaine County is home to:

- Steelhead
- Sockeye Salmon
- Chinook Salmon
- Pacific Lamprey
- Greater Sage Grouse
- Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo
- Wolverine
- Snake River Phyllis
- Bliss Rapids Snail
- Blind Cave Leiodid Beetle



Sage Grouse⁸¹



Public Lands in Blaine County⁸⁰

Regional Coordination

In addition to the Blaine County government and the five cities therein, community partners in habitat conservation include:

Heart of the Rockies

Idaho Conservation League (ICL)

Idaho Department of Lands (IDL)

Idaho Fish & Game

The Pioneers Alliance

The National Forest Foundation

Natural Resources and Conservation Services, USDA - Idaho Office

Sawtooth Society

Trout Unlimited

The Nature Conservancy

University of Idaho

US Forest Service (USFS)