



High Desert Partnership Launching Major Climate Resilience Initiative in Harney County

BURNS, OR – High Desert Partnership (HDP) has been awarded almost \$18.4 million from the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) aimed at building climate resilience across Harney County. This initiative will address critical challenges of water scarcity, wildfire risk, and drought impacts that increasingly threaten the region's ecological and economic stability.

Drawing on 17 years of successful collaboration among diverse interested parties, this initiative will scale up conservation efforts to protect both the agricultural economy and wildlife habitats that make Harney County unique. The program focuses on working closely with local NRCS and multiple partners on implementing climate-smart practices that benefit both local producers and the rich biodiversity of the region.

"The climate challenges facing Harney County require coordinated solutions and unprecedented cooperation," said Brenda Smith, Executive Director at High Desert Partnership. "This initiative builds on our legacy of bringing together private landowners, government agencies, and conservation groups to achieve meaningful results across private and public land boundaries."

Key components of the program include:

- **Water Conservation:** Implementation of targeted practices to increase surface water availability, improve wildlife habitat, enhance forage quality, reduce wildfire risks and enhance drought resilience
- **Wetland Restoration:** Critical improvements to water management infrastructure and floodplain restoration along the Pacific Flyway
- **Sagebrush Sea and Forest Resilience:** Invasive species management, western juniper thinning, and prescribed burns to reduce wildfire risk, improve wildlife habitat and increase the availability of water resources
- **Conservation Easements:** Oregon Agricultural Trust work with landowners for entity held easements of which landowners commit to managing their lands ecological value through specific stewardship practices
- **Collaborative Strategy:** Leverage the trusted partnership of High Desert Partnership to scale up conservation efforts across Harney County

The initiative specifically targets Harney County, a region critically dependent on water for its habitat, wildlife, and economic sustainability. "An investment of this size will have substantial impacts on wetland dependent birds, community members, and producers in Harney County. Ducks Unlimited is honored to be a part of such an effective partnership, and we look forward to getting to work on infrastructure improvements for multi-purpose benefit," said Ashley Tunstall, Biologist Ducks Unlimited. By focusing on reducing system vulnerabilities and addressing direct threats, the program aims to create a more resilient landscape capable of adapting to and recovering from climate change impacts.

"Every day, farmers and ranchers in Harney County must meet the increasing challenges of climate change with limited resources," noted Nellie McAdams, Executive Director at Oregon Agricultural Trust. "The multifaceted approach of this

collaborative RCPP grant will provide much needed support for the implementation of landscape-scale conservation. Oregon Agricultural Trust is excited to work with High Desert Partnership to help Harney County landowners permanently protect their agricultural land and keep it in production."

This collaborative effort brings together private landowners, state and federal agencies, local government, and non-governmental organizations in a unified approach to natural resource management. Oregon Agricultural Trust, Harney Soil & Water Conservation District, Harney County Watershed Council, Harney Cooperative Weed Management Area, Ducks Unlimited, WildLandscapes International, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish & Wildlife and many other partners within all six of High Desert Partnership's network of collaboratives will play roles in implementing projects within this initiative. The program will implement practices that promote healthy sagebrush, forest and wetland ecosystems while supporting the region's agricultural producers.

"WildLandscapes International is excited to be part of this transformative effort with High Desert Partnership, helping Harney County communities bring climate-smart practices to life. This grant is a major step forward for both the region's resilience and the people who rely on it. True success depends on everyone working together, and we're honored to stand alongside so many committed partners to protect both the land and livelihoods of Harney County. We hope this model of collaboration will inspire similar efforts elsewhere," shared David Houghton, Director of WildLandscapes International.

High Desert Partnership will be working closely with NRCS and our partners to develop project contracts, with outreach to interested landowners beginning in Spring 2025. Project implementation will start in Summer 2025, with funding strategically allocated over a 5-year period to support phased conservation projects and continuous landowner engagement through 2030.

[About High Desert Partnership](#)

The High Desert Partnership brings people together to find collaborative solutions to natural resource, community and ecological challenges and opportunities in Harney County.

[About Oregon Agricultural Trust](#)

Oregon Agricultural Trust partners with farmers and ranchers to protect agricultural lands for the benefit of Oregon's economy, communities, and landscapes.

[About Harney Soil & Water Conservation District](#)

Harney Soil & Water Conservation District conserves, protects and develops soil, water and other related resources for the economic and environmental benefit of Harney County

[About Harney County Watershed Council](#)

The Harney County Watershed Council works to improve watershed health for the benefit of Harney County communities and the environment.

[About Harney Cooperative Weed Management Area](#)

Harney Cooperative Weed Management Areas purpose is to establish a cooperative weed management area in Harney County for the purpose of controlling invasive plant species.

[About Ducks Unlimited](#)

Ducks Unlimited conserves, restores, and manages wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl. These habitats also benefit other wildlife and people.

[About WildLandscapes International](#)

WildLandscapes International works with diverse stakeholders and communities to conserve big wild places for wildlife and people.

For More Information

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High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives in Harney County Oregon including the Biz Harney Opportunity Collaborative, Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan Collaborative, Youth Changing the Community Collaborative, Harney County Wildfire Collaborative and the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative.

