

Trail Protection Update: Can We Win on the Checkerboard?

In central Washington, roughly from Blowout Mountain to Snoqualmie Pass, the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) passes in and out of privately held timberland. Here, the forest is divided in a checkerboard pattern between **Forest Service** land and land that was originally granted to Burlington Northern Railroad. Burlington Northern Railroad received title to every other square mile during the railroad subsidies of the 1880s in return for laying tracks across Stampede Pass. Subsequently, much of the railroad's portions of the forest were conveyed to Plum Creek Timber Company, which still owns them today.

For the current PCT user, this means that for approximately 25 miles, as it crosses from privately held to Forest Service land, the trail experience alternates between old clear cuts that can be difficult to traverse and include a plethora of dirt roads, and more natural areas (including pockets of old-growth forest). For the past decade, acquiring these checkerboard parcels in Washington has been a top priority for both the **Pacific Crest Trail Association** (PCTA) and the Forest Service. In fact, in the last 10 years, eleven checkerboard parcels have been purchased and added to the Snoqualmie National Forest, limiting the negative impacts of timber harvesting, linking significant habitat, and reducing land management complexities. An additional parcel is in the final stages of protection. This parcel, located at Stampede Pass was recently purchased by **The Trust for Public Land** (TPL) from Plum Creek. TPL purchased the property because its "option" to do so was running out and neither TPL, nor the PCTA, nor the Forest Service, wanted to risk the land being sold for timber harvest or, worse still, housing development. As this magazine went to press, TPL was still holding the property while the Forest Service secured funding to purchase it. Funding for the acquisition has been allocated by Congress and the parcel is expected to be conveyed to the Forest Service this summer.

Although we are confident that the Stampede Pass parcel will be safely conveyed to the Forest Service soon, approximately six other checkerboard parcels that include 12 miles of the PCT are still unprotected. The Trust for Public Land is holding a number of options to purchase these parcels from Plum Creek Timber Company but time is running out and the majority of the options expire later this year.

"It's one of the Forest Service's top regional priorities to purchase these lands, and we're working to help them to secure the necessary funding, but money is tight," says The Trust for Public Land project manager, **Rinee Merritt**.

The PCT has right-of-way easements through the checkerboard. "But," says **Mike Dawson**, PCTA Trail Operations Director, "right-of-way doesn't guarantee a good quality trail and does nothing to protect the condition of the land or the recreational experience on it. Each time the Forest Service buys



a parcel of land – thanks to help from TPL – we're a step closer to a more consistent natural landscape that hikers can really enjoy. If our members inspire legislators to support this important work, in less than 10 years we could finish the public acquisition of the Pacific Crest Trail in Washington State."

We hope that our members will write to their local representatives and show support for the work that TPL, the PCTA, and the Forest Service are doing to consolidate the checkerboard and create an excellent trail experience between Blowout Mountain and Snoqualmie Pass. ↗

Above: A Google Earth image of the Cascade crest in central Washington where checkerboard land ownership patterns threaten the PCT experience.

The Trust for Public Land (TPL) is a national, non-profit, land conservation organization that conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, community gardens, historic sites, rural lands, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.

Since 1972, TPL has worked with willing landowners, community groups, and national, state, and local agencies to complete more than 3,000 land conservation projects in 46 states, protecting more than 2 million acres. In addition to working with the U.S. Forest Service and the PCTA to protect and conserve lands through which the PCT passes, TPL has also made major contributions to the PCTA to support the annual Trail Fest event. To learn more about TPL's important work, visit www.TPL.org.