

SFRB Acquisition Project Evaluation Proposal
San Juan County Land Bank -- Meng acquisition / Watmough Bay

1. Background

Seining of Watmough Bay or Bight has documented the presence of juvenile Chinook salmon (Wyllie-Echeverria, 2005). In addition, anecdotal reports indicate that schools of juvenile Chinook and other salmon species use the area regularly (Barsh, pers. comm.).

The Nature Conservancy has designated Watmough Bay, along with much of the south end of Lopez as a priority conservation area. The factors leading to this designation include a high degree of marine biodiversity and a plethora of marine communities including eelgrass and kelp beds, rocky intertidal areas, and gravel beaches.

This is one of the few areas in the San Juans where the land-sea/freshwater-saltwater dynamic remains in a highly functional state. The Bay is a pristine system fed by a marsh area on federally and locally owned and protected properties on the southeast end of Lopez Island. Intact freshwater marshes are extremely rare in the San Juans. Due to the marsh and adjacent forested areas, terrestrial influences on the Bay are strong, from freshwater mixing to an influx of insects and other invertebrates into the marine environment. The Bay also contains substantial areas of eelgrass as can be seen from attached photos and the topographic map.

Additionally, the south end of Lopez Island is a high energy area with tremendous tidal rips and currents. The bight offers salmon and forage fish refuge from these areas.

The subject parcel for acquisition is 7.29 acres on the south side of the Bay. The parcel has pristine rocky intertidal habitat. The uplands are entirely forested with older forests of red cedar, sitka spruce and douglas fir, among other species. Some of the individual trees likely exceed 300 years of age. The upland understory is in excellent condition as well. In addition, an adjacent parcel with two building sites will be donated to the Land Bank following closing.

2. Problem statement

The subject parcel has been slated for development. If the plan proceeds, sixty percent of the upland area (20,000 board feet) would be harvested and a number of structures would be placed on the site. There is concern that this development would adversely affect water quality in the Bay, because the site is quite steep with grades exceeding 30°. Additionally, county development rules allow residences to be placed within 50 feet of the shoreline and require no vegetative buffer.

Given the exceptional water quality in the Bay, existing eelgrass community and abundance of marine life, the potential for increased nutrient pollution and resulting turbidity is quite concerning.

Lastly, should this development occur, an opportunity to better understand the workings of an intact terrestrial/marine system would be lost.

3. Project objectives

The project would protect water quality in the Bay in perpetuity. Much of the bay is already protected. If the acquisition of this parcel is successful, the only other privately held property, directly to the east of the subject, will be donated in part to the San Juan Land and San Juan Preservation Trust. As a result, the entire shoreline of the Bay will be off-limits to development.

The Bureau of Land Management, the primary land owner around the bay, does not yet have a management plan for its properties. However, BLM's planning analysis identifies the preferred alternatives as "management for natural values" and inclusion of all properties into an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (BLM-OR-PT-90-38-1792).

The acquired/donated property will be managed as a natural preserve with no timber harvesting and only limited pedestrian access.

4. Project approach

- a. The property has 680 feet of marine shoreline. An additional approximately 500 feet will also be protected on the adjacent property. The upland portion of the property is extremely important in limiting impacts to the Bay. Juvenile Chinook use the Bay regularly.
- b. The property contains intact rocky intertidal shoreline. The upland portion is entirely forested. The property to be purchased encompasses 7.29 acres with an additional 5 acres to be donated after closing. Both properties would be added to a protected area of gravel beach, freshwater marsh and upland forested areas creating a preserve exceeding 400 acres.
- c. Adjacent protected areas owned by BLM and the Land Bank include another 2200 feet of shoreline along the Bay. These shoreline areas include approximately 500 feet of gravel beach with the rest being rocky intertidal. Chadwick Hill towers over the Bay providing nesting areas for peregrine falcons and other species. Behind the Hill forested areas slope down toward a freshwater wetland. The wetland drains into the Bay through the gravel beach.
- d. The property is entirely forested and requires no restoration. The entire Bay watershed is one of the best functioning systems in San Juan County.
- e. Dr. Tina Wyllie-Echeverria completed a survey for juvenile salmon of the area in 2005. Additionally, there have been anecdotal reports from neighbors about schools of juvenile salmon (60-80mm) in the Bay. Dr. Lincoln Bormann, director

of the Land Bank, and Eliza Habegger, Land Bank Land Steward, have evaluated the forested area of the site in 2006 and 2007.

- f. The property is at immediate risk for development. The site plan has been approved and a well has been drilled for residential use. In addition, San Juan County allows residences to be placed 50 feet from the shoreline with no provision for a vegetative buffer. Given the steep slopes on the property, the level of clearing to be allowed and lack of vegetative buffer will most likely greatly impact the water quality in the Bay.
- g. The Land Bank has been interested in this parcel for some time. In particular, we have wanted to preserve the character of Watmough Bay and its ecological functions. It is only now coming on the market.
- h. The Land Bank has negotiated a purchase and sale agreement with the owner. The transaction closed on September 7, 2007.
- i. Project partners approached the previous owner about a conservation easement. However, the owner was not interested in retaining fee ownership. Additionally, the property was too small (only one buildable unit) to consider partitioning.
- j. The San Juan Preservation Trust will partner on the acquisition of this parcel and will also partner on the donation of the adjacent 5-acre property.
- k. The San Juan County Land Bank now owns the property.
- l. The property will be managed as a natural area preserve with limited pedestrian access. No timber harvesting will occur. Invasive species eradication may be conducted at some point in the future, but is not a problem at this time. Additionally, the property will be available to researchers wishing to examine the relationship between terrestrial and marine systems.
- m. San Juan County Land Bank -- Dr. Lincoln Bormann, Director, Eliza Habegger, Land Steward, Doug McCutchen, Preserve Steward. San Juan Preservation Trust -- Tim Seifert, Executive Director, Dean Dougherty, Director of Stewardship.

5. Tasks and Time Schedule

The property closed on September 7, 2007.

6. Constraints and uncertainties

None.