

PENTICTON - The acquisition of 600 hectares of grassland south of Penticton will help preserve one of the province's most endangered ecosystems, Burnaby-Willingdon MLA Joan Sawicki announced today.

Sawicki also announced the release of a critical wildlife habitat atlas, which focuses on the habitat of endangered species in the South Okanagan.

"The rapid growth and development in the South Okanagan make it critical to plan for the future to preserve sensitive habitats," said Sawicki. "The Okanagan has many vulnerable and threatened species that need protection to survive."

Sawicki was speaking on behalf of Environment Minister Cathy McGregor, the trustee of the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund. The trust fund provided more than \$400,000 towards acquiring Long's Ranch. More funding was provided by the Nature Trust of British Columbia, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the U.S. Nature Conservancy.

Long's Ranch is near White Lake in the bunchgrass zone of the South Okanagan Valley. Twelve threatened wildlife species are found in the area, including the sage thrasher, a nationally endangered bird. Other important species include: the tiger salamander, peregrine falcon, horned lark, upland sandpiper, grasshopper sparrow and white-tailed jackrabbit.

The Nature Trust and the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks have been working closely with area residents for several years on ways to protect this endangered habitat. In 1996, conservation interests acquired the White Lake Ranch. With the addition of Long's Ranch and land leased from the National Research Council, the Nature Trust now holds title to more than 1,100 hectares in the White Lake area.

B.C. anglers, hunters, trappers and guides are major contributors to the enhancement and acquisition of fish and wildlife habitat through their contributions to the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund. Since 1981, revenues from fishing, hunting, trapping and guide licence surcharges have financed over \$2.8 million worth of enhancement and acquisition projects in the South Okanagan.

"Strong partnerships and community support are fundamental to the success of conservation projects like these," said Sawicki. "By working together, we can protect this unique wildlife habitat that is such an important feature of the South Okanagan."

Dick Richards, chairman of the Nature Trust, said: "We are delighted to be able to make this announcement today, in conjunction with the release of the Habitat Atlas, because of the importance of the landscape linkages between White and Vaseux Lakes. Our challenge is to develop a management plan for our properties that is compatible with our objectives and the interests of the community. "

The critical wildlife Habitat Atlas focuses on species in the South Okanagan and Lower Similkameen that the provincial government has designated as candidates for endangered, threatened or vulnerable status. The Nature Trust of B.C. administered the production of the atlas with funding from a number of partners.

The Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks provided \$500,000 towards the development of the atlas. The Habitat Conservation Trust Fund provided an additional \$380,000.

Copies of the atlas are available for purchase on a cost-recovery basis through the Nature Trust of British Columbia by calling (604) 925-1128.