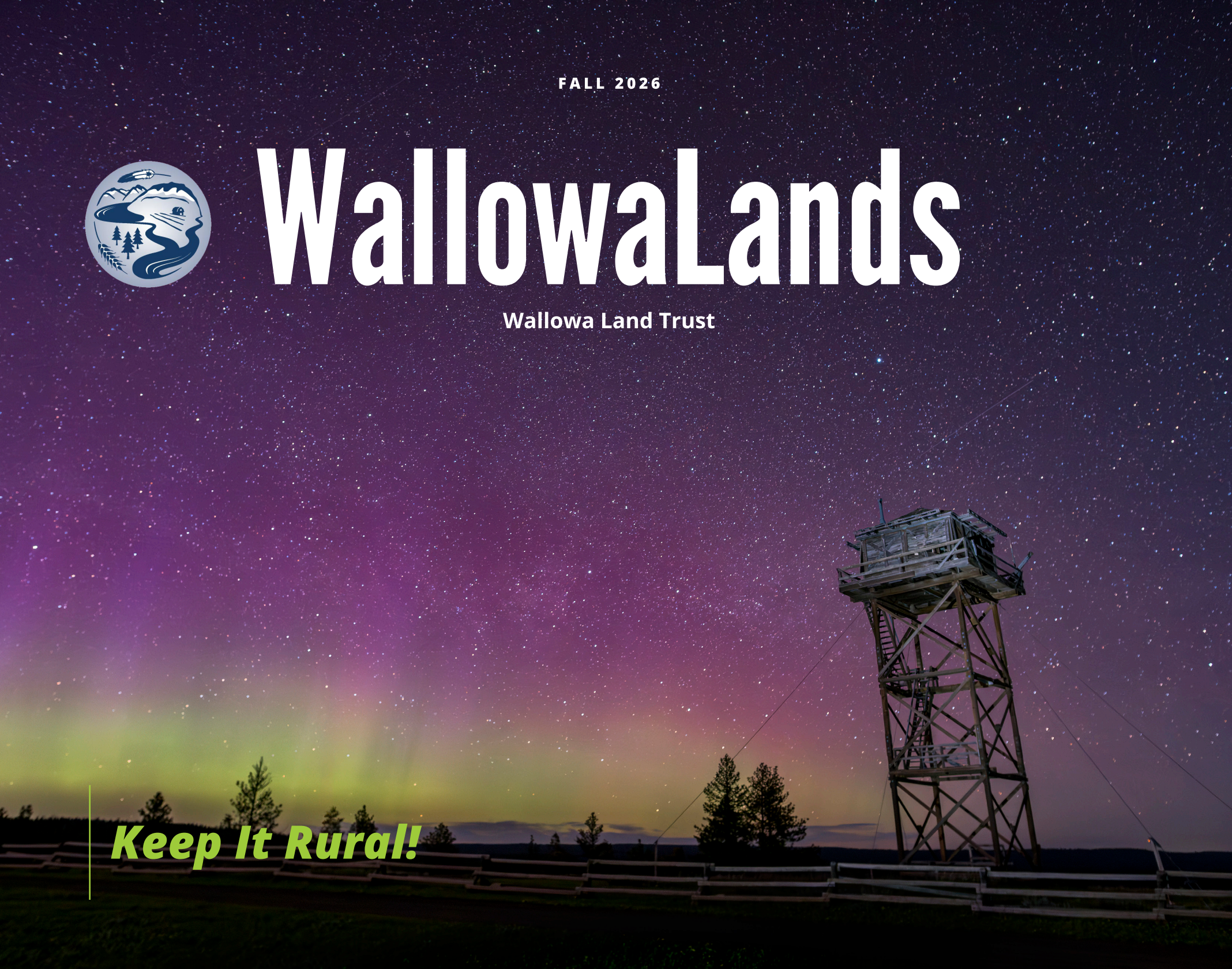
FALL 2026

WallowaLands

Wallowa Land Trust



Keep It Rural!



LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I love science fiction. Fantasy too. There is something about being able to immerse myself in a world that is so completely foreign, and often wildly implausible, that soothes my overtaxed brain. I know some people wouldn't deign to read the trash I voraciously consume, and that's okay. It's not like I don't lower myself to reading nonfiction every now and then. But it has to be a good story! Because in the end, that is what it all comes down to: the storytelling.

Over the past decade, the idea of using "storytelling" to share an organization's work has become front and center. When I first heard the term used this way, something about it didn't sit right with me. As an avid reader, I understand and deeply appreciate the concept of storytelling. A good story entrances you, and you think about it long after it has been told. But the word "story" comes with baggage. A story doesn't have to be true. It can be embellished or just flat-out, patently untrue. But if it's interesting enough, we still get sucked in. For example, after reading *The Martian*, I remain convinced that duct tape is a perfectly adequate material for repairing a habitat on Mars.



I believe that if we are going to tell stories about who we are, what we value and why our work matters, those stories need to be true. Not technically or aspirationally true. They need to match what we actually do, especially when living up to our stated values requires us to make difficult or uncomfortable choices.

At the same time storytelling became central to how we talked about our work, the conservation community began undergoing a reckoning. We began examining our own history and impacts on marginalized communities. With guidance from the Oregon Land Justice Project, an initiative of the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts, we undertook a careful assessment of our own internal culture, decision-making processes and impacts. And it has led us to some uncomfortable truths.

Truth #1: Even though working with Indigenous people has always been in our mission, we weren't taking the time to understand what true engagement meant beyond transactional projects. The projects we were pursuing, using traditional conservation tools, could further cement inequitable access to land, which in turn further alienated people from being able to build relationships with land.

Truth #2: Our internal culture was shaped by a conservation movement that held up a vision of pristine wilderness, free from human interference, as the ultimate conservation goal without recognizing that humans have always been part of the land. Not only that, we come from a Western conservation tradition that privileged certain ways of knowing while often failing to recognize knowledge grounded in generations of lived relationship with land. We have been very good at thinking about what land we wanted to protect, but we weren't always as good at asking who had a relationship with that land, whose knowledge mattered, who had access to it, or who had been excluded from it.

Right now, there is tremendous interest in working with Indigenous communities and incorporating Indigenous perspectives into our work. That attention is long overdue. But I also worry about what happens when relationships with Indigenous communities become part of the story an organization tells about itself. There is a risk that the relationship itself becomes evidence of our own values rather than something we are accountable to. It's easy to talk about partnership, reciprocity and Indigenous knowledge. It's much harder to ask who benefits, who holds decision-making power, who has access to land, and whether anything is actually changing on the ground.

So we have had to examine not only our motivations, biases and weaknesses, but also the story we tell about ourselves. And the real question is: Does that story actually match what we are doing on the ground? Are we living up to the standards we have set for ourselves? Are we willing to take action and speak even when it isn't the easy path? Are we willing to discover that something we have always done—or something we have always believed about conservation—needs to change?

The past 13 years I have spent at Wallowa Land Trust have changed me profoundly. I have more pride and passion for the work that we do, not because I think we have figured it all out, but because we are willing to challenge ourselves, stretch into uncomfortable truths and do meaningful work that will impact many generations—both human and non-human.

There will always be more for us to learn. Thank you for sticking with us as we continue to figure things out. We are learning to live with uncertainty because circumstances change, people change and society changes. We are learning, and as we learn, we are broadening what we mean by community and what we mean by conservation.

We are going to keep telling you stories about this work. But more importantly, we are going to keep asking ourselves whether the stories we tell you are true. Whether our decisions match our words. Whether the conservation we practice reflects the conservation we say we believe in.

The stories in this newsletter are some of the ways we are trying to do exactly that.

Warmly,

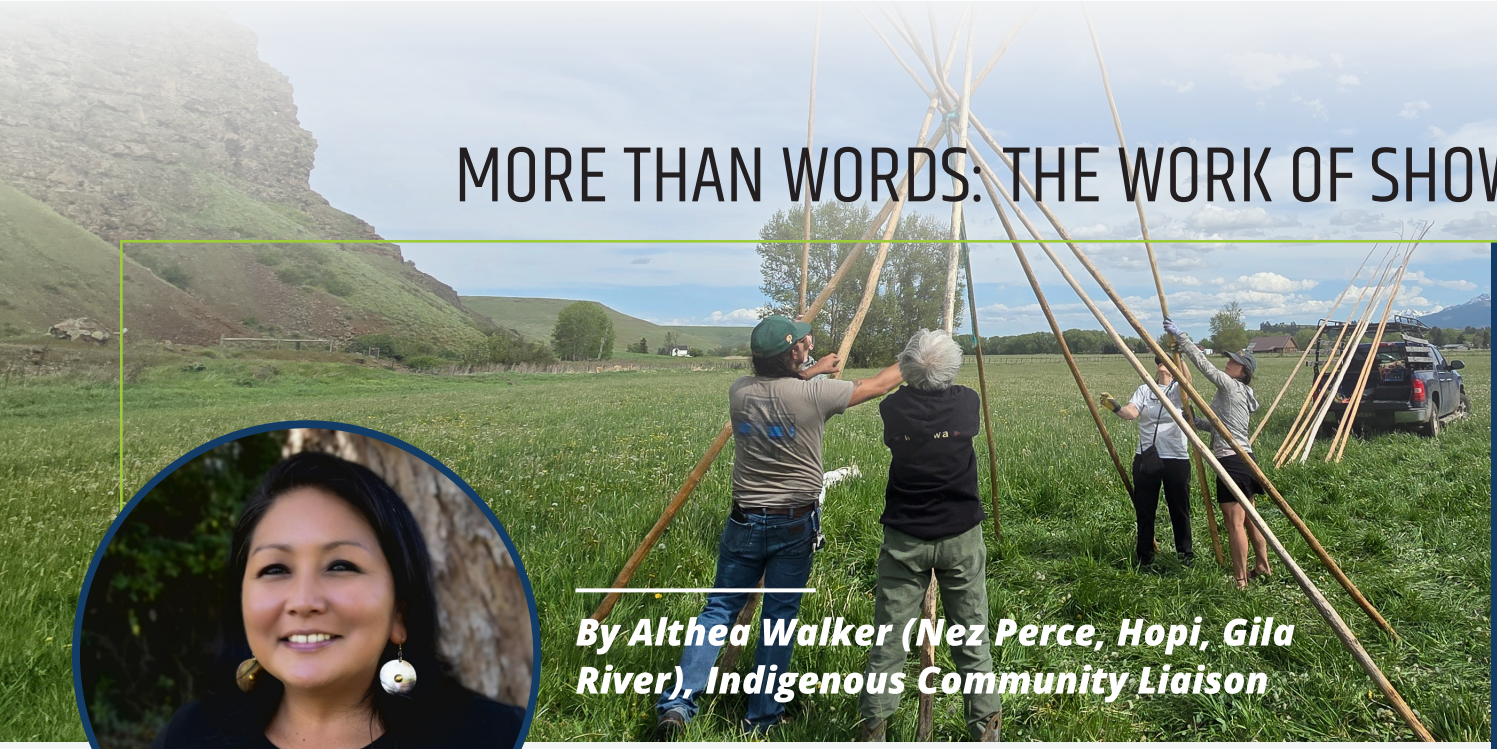
Kathleen Ackley

Executive Director

P.S.: For my fellow science fiction and fantasy lovers, I highly recommend the *Shadow of the Leviathan* series by Robert Jackson Bennett. Feel free to send me book recommendations at kathleen@wallowalandtrust.org.

Cover | *Photo: Leon Werdinger, Aurora borealis at Red Hill Lookout*
Pg 2-3 | *Photo: Ellen Morris Bishop*

MORE THAN WORDS: THE WORK OF SHOWING UP



By Althea Walker (Nez Perce, Hopi, Gila River), Indigenous Community Liaison

I have been thinking a lot about what it means to be present.

Not just to show up somewhere, but to be. For my people, that kind of presence has not always been possible. One hundred and forty-nine years ago, my ancestors were told to leave the Wallowa Valley. They were removed from the land that had held them, fed them, and taught them since time immemorial. And now, generations later, I am here.

I do not take that lightly. I would not be here today if it weren't for my ancestors, their endurance, their prayers, their refusal to let our ways disappear. When I think about the Wallowa Gathering, that is what I feel underneath everything: gratitude, and responsibility.

The Wallowa Gathering is many things. It is a time for Tribal members to be together on the land. It is a time for ceremony, for shared meals, and for sharing songs that carry our presence back onto the land that cared for us for so long. But it is also something more. It is a doorway.

For most of my life, a trip to Wallowa County was not a simple thing. It meant planning, permission, distance, and navigating a landscape of boundaries that were never drawn with us in mind. It meant being a guest in a place that is, in every way that matters, home.

That is what I want to change. Not just for me, but for my friends, relatives, and community. I want our presence here to be ordinary. I want Tribal members to be able to be present to fish, to gather, to tend the land, to speak our language. I want the plants and animals to hear our songs again. I want them to feel our presence.

THE WALLOWA GATHERING: RETURNING TO THE LAND

Each spring, Indigenous families return to their ancestral homeland to dig traditional roots, practice their culture, and reconnect with the land and one another.

175+
Tribal members took part in May 2026 (up from 17 Nez Perce women in 2019)

20
private landowners now provide access (up from 2 in 2019)

~80,000
acres open for traditional gathering (up from 2,000 acres in 2019)

3
states represented: Oregon, Washington and Idaho

Pg 4 | *Photos: Tipi & root cleaning, Kathleen Ackley*
Pg 5 | *Photo: Potluck, Althea Walker*

“This is where the Wallowa Land Trust comes in, and where I come in.”

When I was hired as the Indigenous Community Liaison, it was not simply a new position. It was a continuation of the Land Trust’s commitment. It was the Land Trust saying, out loud and in practice, that our relationships with Tribal and Indigenous communities are not a side project or a box to check. They are central to what conservation means here. That commitment is why I said yes. It is also why I hold this work so close.

One way we put that commitment into practice is by supporting the Wallowa Gathering. But I want to be clear about what the Gathering is for. It is not just to help gatherers return once a year. It is to strengthen relationships between Tribal and non-Tribal people. It is to reduce the barriers and challenges that have kept Tribal members from accessing land, because to me, access is relationship. When a Tribal gatherer can be present on the landscape without asking permission, without paperwork, without explaining why they belong there, that is not just access. That is a relationship being repaired and strengthened.

People sometimes ask me what relationship-building actually looks like. I understand why. It sounds abstract, like something you can check off a list. But it isn’t. It looks like showing up again and again, even when there is nothing to announce. It looks like listening more than talking. It looks like sitting with discomfort instead of turning away from it. It looks like a landowner returning a phone call, a gate left open, or a shared meal where everyone can just be.

It also looks like hard conversations. The kind where we ask who benefits, who holds decision-making power, who has access to land, and whether anything is actually changing on the ground. Those questions are not always comfortable. But they are necessary, and I have found that people are more willing to sit with them than we sometimes assume.

To those who steward land in this valley, I know many of you love this place deeply. I know you have cared for it. I am not here to tell you that you don’t belong. I am here to ask whether we can widen what we mean by community, whether there is room for us, too.

That is what supporting the Gathering has taught me. There is room. It is not always easy to find, and it is not always comfortable, but it is there. I have seen it in small moments, as Tribal elders and landowners laugh together, as we share a meal together, and as we spend time on the land together. I have seen it in the quiet after a hard conversation, when people choose to stay instead of walking away.

This is not a job for me. It is a purpose. It is the reason I am here, in this place, in this time. My ancestors fought and suffered so that I could be present on this land and work to help our people return to it. I hold that close. I hold it every day.

I don’t want the Gathering to be the only time we are present here. I want it to be one of many. I want this valley to know more of us again—our voices, our footsteps, our prayers. I want our more-than-human relatives to hear us and feel us and know that we have not forgotten them.

That is the work. It is slow. It is generational. And it is worth everything.

So if you are reading this and wondering how to be part of strengthening relationships, here is my invitation: you don’t have to have all the answers. None of us do. We just have to be willing to show up, again and again, and to keep asking whether the story we tell about ourselves matches what we are actually doing. ■





PIECE BY PIECE: RETURNING THE WEST MORAINE

WEST MORAINE LAND RETURN

18.92 acres
returning to Nez Perce ownership

Nearly 105 acres
contiguous Tribal land when complete

$807,600
total project goal

$400,000
already committed

$407,600
still to raise

September 2027
goal for transfer to the Nez Perce Tribe

The project budget includes the $650,000 purchase price, due diligence and transaction expenses, and funding for long-term stewardship.

Spreading across the West Moraine of Wallowa Lake are ancient boulders, towering ponderosa pines and native bunchgrasses. It is not unusual to see a bobcat or black bear rambling through the trees. While houses continue to crowd the shoreline, the steep hillside up to the crest of the moraine has retained much of its original character.

Unlike the East Moraine, however, most of the West Moraine remains privately owned and developable. That is slowly starting to change as more of this landscape returns to the Nez Perce Tribe.

In 2023, Wallowa Land Trust returned 30 acres on the West Moraine to the Tribe. Since then, the Tribe has acquired another 56 acres, and a local family donated an additional 17 acres farther north. Slowly, more of this sacred landscape is returning to the care of the Nez Perce Tribe.

That connection between the Nez Perce people and the Moraines is not new. More than a decade ago, when the East Moraine was threatened by development, the Nez Perce Tribe was among its strongest advocates for protection. The Tribe described the Moraines as part of the Nez Perce homeland and emphasized their cultural and religious significance, undeveloped character and importance as wildlife habitat and a migration corridor.

Now we have an opportunity to add another important piece.

Wallowa Land Trust is currently working with the Tribe to acquire an additional 19 acres stretching from Lakeshore Drive up to the crest of the West Moraine. The property sits directly between the 30-acre parcel the Land Trust returned to the Tribe in 2023 and the 56-acre property the Tribe subsequently acquired. When this project is



Photo: Dave Jensen

complete, those three parcels will form nearly 105 contiguous acres under the Tribe's care.

The property's ecological importance extends beyond its boundaries. The undeveloped bunchgrass prairie and ponderosa pine forest include designated Deer Winter Range, providing food and shelter during the winter months when deep snow and cold temperatures can make survival difficult. The property also helps maintain an important wildlife corridor connecting the Wallowa Mountains, Wallowa Lake and the Wallowa Valley.

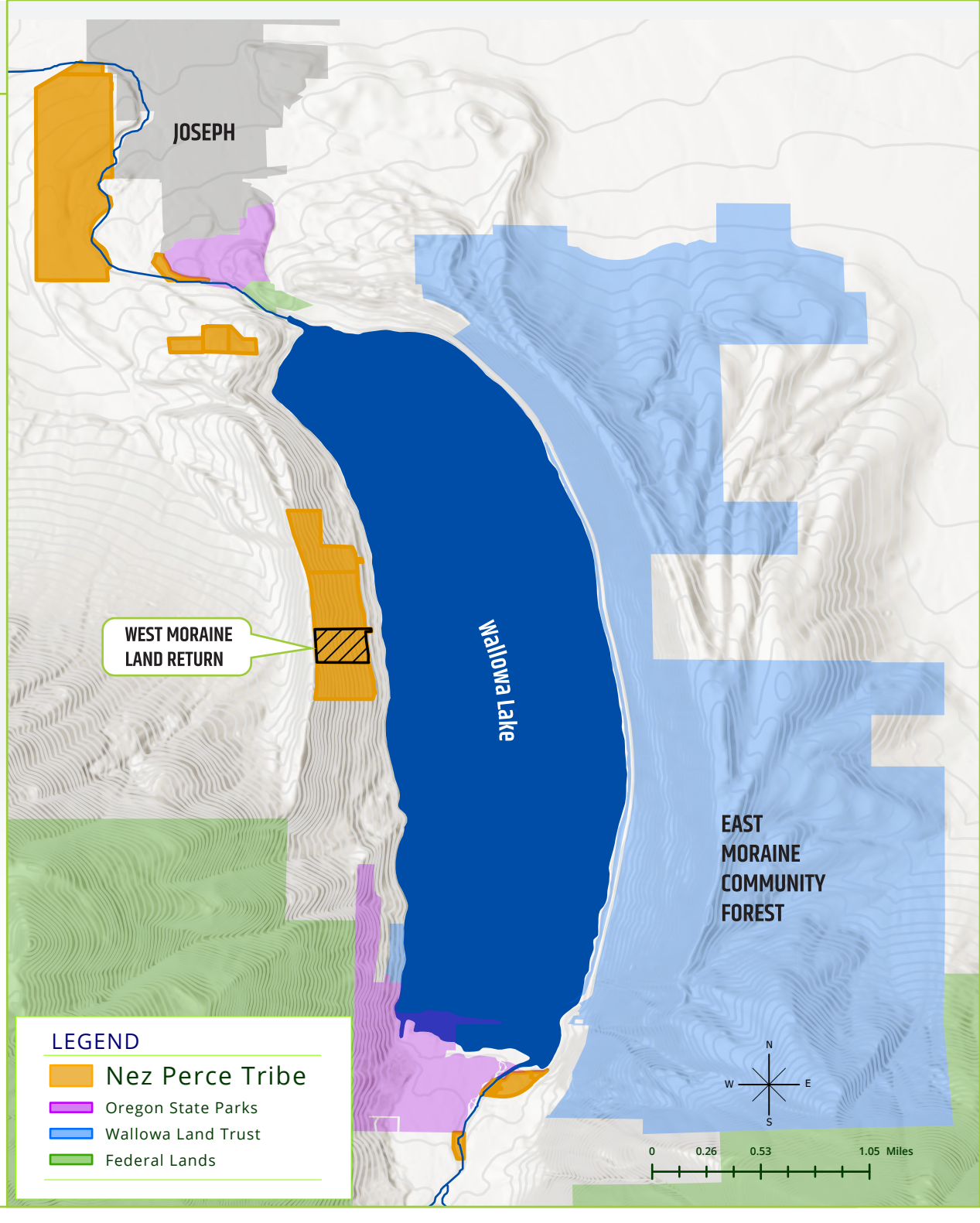
For this project, land return and conservation come together. The property will be permanently protected from development, while responsibility for its care and future will rest with the Nez Perce Tribe.

Wallowa Land Trust is coordinating the fundraising, due diligence and real estate work necessary to complete the acquisition and transfer title to the Tribe. The purchase price is $650,000, but the full project cost is $807,600. In addition to acquiring the land, the project budget includes due diligence and transaction costs and $107,900 for long-term stewardship. The stewardship funding was calculated to cover ongoing costs associated with the property, including taxes, land management and annual monitoring.

A generous donor has already committed $400,000 toward the project, giving us an extraordinary start. We still have $407,600 to raise, with the goal of completing the acquisition and transferring the property to the Nez Perce Tribe by September 2027.

Nearly 19 acres may not seem like much when viewed against the enormous landscape surrounding Wallowa Lake, but look at a map and this little piece suddenly becomes much more important. It fills a gap, reconnecting nearly 105 acres of the West Moraine and restoring an important piece of the Nez Perce homeland.

Piece by piece, the landscape is changing.



THROUGH THE GREEN GATE: SEEING THE EAST MORAINE ANEW



New aspens on the East Moraine, September 2026.

Pg 8 | *Photo: Aspen, Caitlin Rushlow*
Pg 9 | *Photo: Cow, Merck/Vence*

By Caitlin Rushlow, Conservation Program Manager

In early September, I stepped through the Green Gate and started up the familiar road into the East Moraine Community Forest. It was a foggy day, and after the heat and wildfire smoke of this summer, the air had finally turned cool. Near Wallowa Lake, there is always a little more dampness in the air, and that morning it seemed to carry the scent of the pines as I climbed through the forest. Below, the lake was calm and quiet after the busyness of summer.

I was there to conduct Wallowa Land Trust's annual monitoring of the conservation easement we co-hold with Oregon Department of Forestry on the Community Forest—to walk the property, take photographs, document changes, and make sure the conservation values protected by the easement remain intact.

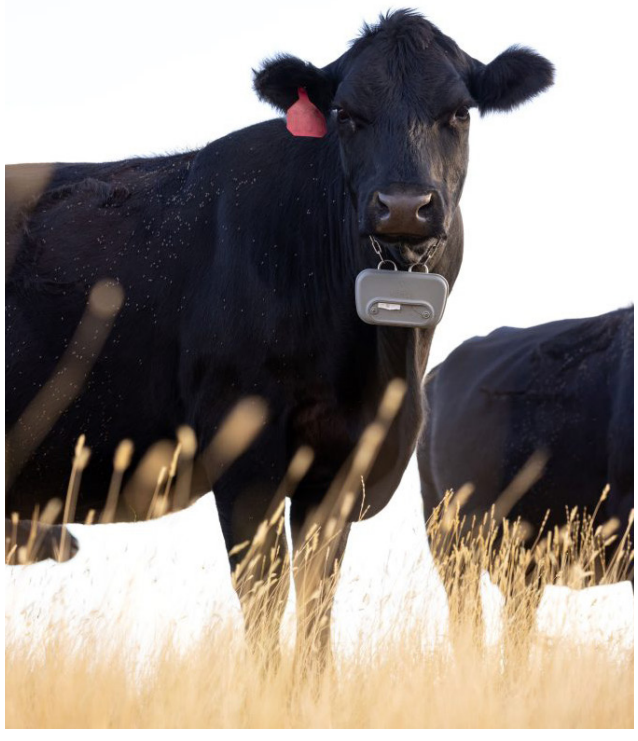
Walking the East Moraine in this role feels meaningful to me because my personal connection to this place began well before I came to work for the Land Trust. I have called Wallowa County home for nine years now, and as a community member I contributed to the East Moraine Campaign that helped bring this remarkable landscape into public ownership and permanently protect it from development. For the past two years, I have had the privilege and responsibility of helping monitor land I once supported protecting as a private citizen.

I follow in the footsteps of WLT staff who monitored the property before me, carrying forward a commitment that will continue long after any one of us has moved on. Conservation easements are permanent, and our responsibility is too: to keep returning, paying attention, and working with our partners to care for the land.

As I made my way from photo point to photo point across the Community Forest this fall, I was looking for change. Monitoring sometimes means documenting a concern that needs our attention. But it also means noticing where our collective efforts are working.

This year, one of the most encouraging changes was easy to spot.





Around a lone aspen tree in the old rodeo grounds, dozens of young aspens rose above the grass. The new growth is possible because of an exclosure built to protect the stand from grazing. Aspen naturally send up new shoots, called suckers, from their roots, but repeated browsing can prevent those shoots from growing into trees. Now that they are protected, these suckers are growing into young trees—the beginnings of a revitalized aspen stand.

It is a small transformation in a big landscape, but it is exactly the kind of change that thoughtful stewardship makes possible.

Continuing down through the forest on the backside of the moraine, I passed several cows wearing swanky chain collars. These collars are part of another management tool in action – a system of "virtual fences" across the moraine. Virtual fences use GPS to keep cows in invisible pastures and deter them from entering sensitive areas, without the need to construct physical fences that could conflict with other uses of the property. When I got down to the valley, I noticed the hot wire along the West Fork of Prairie Creek that helps train the cows to the audio signals from the collars. Unfortunately my dog did not, but after a light shock and a surprised yelp, she sure will on our next visit!

The virtual fence technology isn't perfect, and as I get to the headwaters of the creek, I see an area for improvement in our management of the Community Forest: an old water trough right next to the creek, too close for a virtual fence to keep the cows out of the riparian area and provide water for them at the same time. The streamside vegetation was heavily impacted, and there were lots of hoof postholes in the stream channel. Fortunately, OSU Extension got a grant to move the water trough to a meadow 400 feet away from the creek, which will leave plenty of room for a new virtual fence between the creek and trough. I daydreamed as I looped back up through the forest about the regeneration I might see on my visit next year.

Cresting the moraine, I looked out at the West Moraine and the mountains rising up from Wallowa Lake. I paused as an ache filled my heart. I felt gratitude to be here, to call this place home, and to help steward this land. I remember that I wasn't just following in the footsteps of previous WLT staff. I was walking in the footsteps of the Nimiipuu (Nez Perce people), who have called this place home and stewarded this land since time immemorial.

As I walked back through the Green Gate, I thought about what had changed about my relationship with the East Moraine Community Forest from when I first supported its conservation as a community member. At that time, I was excited to help protect a beautiful landscape where I could enjoy peaceful recreation. Now, working for the Land Trust, I have the privilege and responsibility to steward this place for – and with - the communities we serve. It is a privilege for Wallowa Land Trust to be at the table with partners making decisions about how this land is managed. More importantly, it is our responsibility to ensure that the table includes everyone in our community who calls this place home.



WELCOME DIONNE VALI!

In October, Wallowa Land Trust welcomed Dionne Vali as our new Development Manager.

Dionne grew up in Anaheim, California, and moved to Wallowa County more than 20 years ago to help run her husband's family restaurant. She spent many years in the hospitality business before pursuing her interest in art at the Josephy Center for Arts and Culture, where she served as Program Coordinator, organizing programs and events and managing communications and marketing.

In her new role at the Land Trust, Dionne brings years of experience working with people, organizing events, and building relationships. She loves having nature right outside her door, whether it's spotting eagles at Wallowa Lake or walking to the river to watch spawning kokanee. She also appreciates living in a community where people can come together for a good cause despite their differences.

Outside of work, Dionne enjoys gardening, cooking, painting, a newfound interest in ceramics, and spending time with her husband and friends.

Pg 10 | *Photo: Dionne Vali*
Pg 11 | *Photo: Fly fishing, Leon Werdinger*
Photo: West Moraine, Kathleen Ackley

THANK YOU TO OUR 2025 DONORS!

Wallowa Land Trust's work is made possible by hundreds of individual donors, along with foundations and organizations that believe in what we do. Some gifts support specific projects. Others help pay for the everyday work that keeps WLT running.

To all of you who support Wallowa Land Trust, whether through a monthly donation, an annual gift, or a grant: thank you. We genuinely couldn't do this work without you.

We are especially grateful to the following foundations and organizations for their support:



Braemar Charitable Trust
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Roundhouse Foundation
Seeding Justice
The Nature Conservancy
Wildhorse Foundation
Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative

To all of you who make this work possible: thank you.

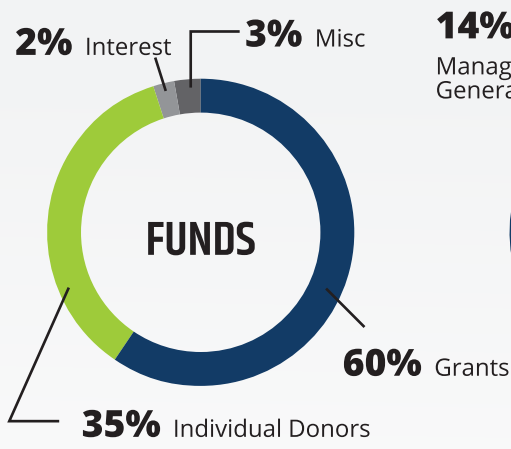


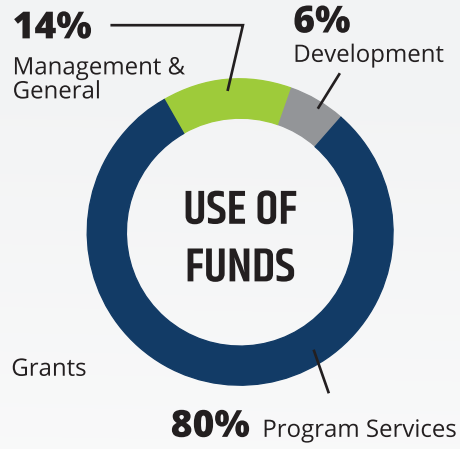
2025 FINANCIAL SNAPSHOT

Revenue & Support	$534,212
Expenses	$412,094

$2.14 MILLION

Total net assets
Includes land owned outright, endowment and stewardship funds, restricted assets, and unrestricted funds.





13	9	3,198	47
Projects Completed	Acres Owned Fee Title	Acres Conservation Easements	Acres Transferred to Nez Perce Tribe

3,254 TOTAL ACRES PROTECTED

WALLOWA LAND TRUST
PO BOX 516
ENTERPRISE, OR 97828

Wallowa Land Trust's mission is to protect the rural nature of the Wallowa Country by working cooperatively with private landowners, Indian tribes, local communities and governmental entities to conserve land.

STAFF

Kathleen Ackley, Executive Director
Jonathan Plummer, Office Administrator
Caitlin Rushlow, Conservation Program Manager
Brian Tibbetts, Grant Writer
Dionne Vali, Development Manager
Althea Walker, Indigenous Community Liaison

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Office Address
117 E Main St
Enterprise, OR 97828

Mailing Address
PO Box 516
Enterprise, OR 97828

541.426.2042
info@wallowalandtrust.org
www.wallowalandtrust.org

PROTECTING THE RURAL NATURE OF WALLOWA COUNTY

