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"We need to be creating systems that have abundant water storage, lots of groundwater, so that when we get these fluctuating climate events that come through — maybe a period of high precipitation — we don't have all that water heading for those streams and making those channels wider and eroding banks," hydrologist Fouty says. "Or we don't have periods where we have a five-year drought or a ten-year drought and streams are going dry."

Beaver stabilize water ecosystems, because the ponds they create have the effect of evening out the flow of water throughout the year. Droughts and floods occur, but beaver ponds hold back water in both circumstances. As a result, floods are less severe and excess water sustains creeks and rivers during droughts. In the absence of beaver ponds, water rushes downstream during floods and nothing remains to alleviate droughts.

A consistent water flow provides habitat for species like Coho salmon, which thrive in the cold water of beaver ponds. Scientific studies have shown that Coho can survive for a time in less than ideal circumstances, as long as the water continues to flow.

While many Oregonians may understand that beaver dams are fish habitat, what's less obvious is that beaver provide a service to neo-tropical migratory

birds as well. "There used to be a huge wetland system, and now that's mostly gone," Fouty says. "Imagine a bird that's doing a 5,000 mile migration, and there are just these little tiny pockets of wetlands still around." Wetland habitat expands from the higher water table created by beaver, also benefiting amphibians. Fouty suggests, "I think the question is: What animal doesn't benefit from having beaver around?"

Fouty worries that beaver restoration work isn't keeping pace with climate change. In order for beaver to thrive and continue their ecological engineering, they need trees like aspen, willow and cottonwood, which sometimes have been eliminated from ecosystems (often due to a dropped water table caused by beaver loss). "There is a process that requires multiple steps and it takes time," she says. "The longer we wait, the narrower and narrower our window is for us to be able to be effective, and for beaver to be effective."

LEAVING IT TO BEAVER

Stanley Petrowski has been involved in watershed restoration for years. He says that reintroducing beaver to native habitat like the headwaters of the Umpqua River would help reduce the impacts of climate change and improve endangered salmon runs.

ODFW's Beaver Working Group and the Southern Umpqua Rural Communities

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