

PGE, tribes to pump over \$4.5M into fish habitats

Aimed at improving Chinook, steelhead fish habitat

By **MICHAEL KOHN**
Bend Bulletin

Grants totaling \$4.5 million have been earmarked to restore fish habitat and improve water quality in streams and rivers in central Oregon. The grants were jointly approved by Portland General Electric and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, which co-manage the Pelton Round Butte dam complex that created Lake Billy Chinook.

Two of the projects are specifically designed to improve fish passages that help salmon and steelhead migrate up and down streams. The passages benefit fish because various diversions and dams built in recent decades have altered the natural flow and temperatures of waterways.

When fish use the passages they can move between feeding and spawning grounds.

PGE and the Warm Springs tribes have distributed \$26.5 million over the past 15 years for environmental projects in the Deschutes Basin.

The \$4.5 million funding dispersal is the last round of funding PGE will allocate to stream restoration projects. The grants range in size from \$51,000 to \$1.25 million, according to a release from Portland General Electric.

PGE is uniquely positioned to support habitat restoration on the Deschutes, as it owns and operates the dam complex and hydroelectric project near Madras. When the dam was completed in 1965 it blocked fish passage between the lower and upper Deschutes.

PGE and the tribes are



A fish that journeyed back to the Pelton Round Butte dam complex.

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also supporting restoration and research projects to support Pacific lamprey in the lower Deschutes River. The lamprey projects have not yet been awarded but when complete they will total \$1.5 million.

The \$1.25 million Priday Ranch Steelhead Conservation Project is the largest single project in the current round of funding. The project will protect 5,820 acres of grassland and sagebrush habitat in the Trout Creek subbasin, spawning areas for redband trout and summer steelhead. The basin covers portions of Jefferson, Crook and Wasco counties.

The Deschutes Land Trust, which is behind the land purchase, is looking to improve habitat connectivity, water quality and sur-

face flow, according to the PGE statement.

Another project on the list includes the Metolius winter range restoration, a \$250,000 collaborative project between the U.S. Forest Service and the Wild Turkey Federation. The project is designed to improve habitat for mammals and birds that occupy the grasslands area.

On top of projects to restore habitats, PGE's main fish-habitat project over the past decade has been the development of the selective water withdrawal tower, put into operation in 2010. The tower works by pulling water from the surface and bottom of Lake Billy Chinook so water released below the dams more closely matches

conditions before the dams were built.

Fish heading upstream are captured in a trap near the reregulating dam, and then transferred to the upper basin in a truck, around the dams where they can access spawning areas. Since the project started, 1.4 million juvenile salmon and steelhead have passed downstream to migrate to the ocean, according to PGE.

Adult fish have returned to the hydro project annually, with spawning confirmed near Bowman Dam on the Crooked River, in Whychus Creek at Camp Polk and above Camp Sherman on the Metolius River, according to PGE.

But the project is not without its challenges, said Brett Hodgson, the dis-

trict fisheries biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Unfavorable ocean conditions in recent years have contributed to poor ocean survival for smolts, which leads to reduced adult returns, he said. A smolt is a young salmon around 2 years old at the stage of development when it is ready to migrate to sea.

"When smolts hit the ocean they need favorable food and water quality conditions," said Hodgson.

Another challenge is the use of hatchery fish, which are not as resilient as wild fish. Juvenile fish are taken from a hatchery at the base of Round Butte dam and released into tributary habitats in the upper basin. They are later captured at

the selective water withdrawal tower and taken to the Lower Deschutes.

Once they enter the lower Deschutes River, steelhead, Chinook and other fish need to travel a difficult course both downstream and upstream through the Columbia River, including Bonneville Dam.

Hatchery fish are needed, said Hodgson, because adults have returned in numbers too low to support a sustainable population.

"We are making progress but for those who wanted overnight success, it has been a slower effort than some would like," said Hodgson. "But we are headed in the right direction. We continue to evaluate and implement measures to improve success."

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