

# North Fork restoration projects funded

By Richard Hanners  
Blue Mountain Eagle

The North Fork John Day Watershed Council recently received funding that will help them complete three restoration projects this year. The awards were announced by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board. Funding comes from the Oregon Lottery.

## Bear Creek

The Bear Creek Restoration Project was awarded \$81,200. Work is expected to take place from July through September. The tributary to the Middle Fork of the John Day River is located about a mile downstream from Galena.

The project includes excavating a channel through historic mine tailings, placing large pieces of wood in the creek and creating beaver dam analogues in the creek to improve fish habitat.

"This project will allow migratory fish access to a previously inaccessible drainage while also improving that habitat for spawning and rearing of juvenile salmon and steelhead," project coordinator Justin Powell said.

## Desolation Creek

Phase 3 of the Desolation Creek Wet Meadow Restoration Project was awarded \$73,233. The project calls for installing 2.5 miles of fencing to protect 25.5 acres of sensitive wet meadow habitat and is expected to take place from June through December.

Desolation Creek originates in the Southern Blue Mountains and drains about 69,643 acres with 230 stream miles. The watershed provides critical spawning and rearing habitat for mid-Columbia



Contributed photo

Members of the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps under direction of the North Fork John Day Watershed Council in 2016-2017 placed tree limbs in meadow gullies to slow erosion and capture sediment at the Big Mosquito Project along the Middle Fork of the John Day River downstream of Galena.

spring-run chinook salmon, bull trout and mid-Columbia steelhead. Both bull trout and steelhead are designated for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The project will take place on a 13,400-acre property purchased by Ecotrust Forest Management Inc. in 2014 for restoration and community investment. The land is mostly kept open to the public for hiking and camping, with three families leasing portions of the property for livestock.

"When landowners partner with the North Fork John Day Watershed Council and the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, great restoration work can be done," said Marty Eisenbraun, a natural resource manager with Ecotrust Forest Management. "Critical habitat restoration work is accomplished while still managing timber and range resources."

## Granite Creek

The Walton: Ritter Land

protection on Granite Creek, develops dependable alternative water sources, eliminates invasive weeds and thins upland juniper."

## The council

The North Fork John Day Watershed Council was established in the mid-1990s to work with agencies and private landowners to develop upland, in-stream and riparian restoration projects, Executive Director Valeen Madden said.

With a staff of five full-time workers, the nonprofit group maintains an office in Long Creek and partners with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Oregon Department of Forestry, U.S. Forest Service, Grant Soil & Water Conservation District and other agencies.

The council also manages the only Oregon Youth Conservation Corps crew in Grant County, she said. The 14- to 18-year-old workers are typically hired for five-week sessions, Madden said.

This year, the crew will remove fencing and plant vegetation along Long Creek, maintain trails in the wilderness, help the Eastern Oregon Trail Alliance construct new bike trails in the Magone Lake area and install fencing to protect young aspen stands from elk and deer.

Aspen stands provide good habitat for birds and small mammals and aid in water retention, Madden said. After they've matured and fencing is removed, the aspen stands will provide important winter habitat for elk and deer, she said.

For more information on the North Fork John Day Watershed Council, visit nfdjwc.org or call 541-421-3018.

# Environmentalists hope to revive 15-year-old grazing lawsuit

By Mateusz Perkowski  
EO Media Group

Environmentalists hope to resurrect a 15-year-old lawsuit over grazing impacts on bull trout in Oregon's Malheur National Forest by appealing a ruling that favored ranchers.

In April, U.S. District Judge Michael Mosman dismissed a complaint initially filed in 2003 by the Oregon Natural Desert Association and the Center for Biological Diversity, which claimed cattle harm the threatened fish species by trampling egg nests and raising water temperatures.

The two environmental groups are now challenging that decision before the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which takes about 15 months to resolve such cases on average.

At this point, the plaintiffs have simply filed a notice of appeal, which doesn't lay out the arguments for why they believe the judge's opinion was wrong, said Elizabeth Howard, an attorney for ranchers who intervened in the case.

"It's hard to know what ONDA's plans are right now," Howard said, noting that substantive arguments will be made in the plaintiffs' opening brief.

EO Media Group was unable to reach Mac Lacy, the attorney for the environmental groups, for comment.

"We seek to ensure that the Forest Service collects

and appropriately responds to habitat data and makes every possible effort to protect bull trout habitat so this fish isn't wiped out from these two rivers," said Dan Morse, ONDA's conservation director, in an email.

The environmental plaintiffs had argued that only 100 bull trout remain in the Malheur and North Fork Malheur rivers, which should each support 2,000 of the fish.

The U.S. Forest Service authorized grazing on seven allotments spanning thousands of acres even though its own data showed that "riparian management objectives" along the two rivers weren't being attained, the plaintiffs argued.

By ignoring information showing continued degradation of bull trout habitat, such as bank stability and water temperature, the agency violated the National Forest Management Act, according to plaintiffs.

The Forest Service countered that the groups were "cherry-picking" problematic "hot spots" even as broader conditions across the landscape were improving.

Mosman and U.S. Magistrate Judge Paul Papak, who oversaw aspects of the case, agreed with the government that bull trout habitat could be monitored on the "watershed," rather than "stream by stream," and that the plaintiffs hadn't proven grazing had caused the species' decline.

# OWEB awards grant for conservation easement near Painted Hills

\$3.1 million invested in mid-Columbia region

By George Plaven  
EO Media Group

A nonprofit land trust based in Walla Walla, Washington, plans to buy a conservation easement to protect 3 miles of steelhead spawning habitat at a ranch near the Painted Hills in north-central Oregon.

Blue Mountain Land Trust recently received a \$1.42 million grant from the Ore-

gon Watershed Enhancement Board to purchase the easement at Canyon Creek Ranch, on Bear Creek in the John Day Basin.

Jason Bulay, conservation director for the land trust, said the easement will ensure Canyon Creek Ranch stays in agricultural production, while also protecting fish, wildlife, upland sage and grassland habitat.

"We all benefit, I think, from having healthy populations of fish and wildlife," Bulay said. "Some of these are very important species, from a cultural and economic stand-

point."

In particular, Bulay said they intend to preserve healthy riparian habitat for mid-Columbia steelhead, which are listed as a threatened species. The easement includes 3.1 miles of steelhead habitat in Bear Creek, adjacent to the Painted Hills Unit in the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument.

Historically, Canyon Creek Ranch was owned by a land and cattle company which, according to the project application, caused extensive degradation by overgrazing the uplands and allowing cattle unrestricted access to riparian areas.

The current landowners, Terrance and Peggy Long, purchased the ranch in 2000. Since then, they have worked with multiple partners, includ-

ing OWEB, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Wheeler Soil and Water Conservation District and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs to restore the property.

Together, they have cut juniper on more than 665 acres and converted open irrigation ditches to pipes. Last year, the Wheeler SWCD installed 21 artificial beaver dam structures along the creek to increase surface flows in streams that otherwise dry up during the summer. The tribes have also committed an additional \$500,000 for riparian zone restoration through 2020.

Bulay said the land trust was excited to work with such committed landowners.

"We like it when we can work with a landowner who shares our goals, and permanently protect that land," he

said.

In the past, Blue Mountain Land Trust served four counties in southeast Washington, along with Umatilla and Union counties in northeast Oregon. The organization opened a new John Day region office in July 2017, expanding into Grant, Gilliam, Wheeler and Morrow counties.

"It's a lot of the same resource concerns that we've been dealing with here in the Walla Walla area, as far as the salmon and steelhead spawning streams and the wildlife habitat and the working lands," Bulay said. "We thought there were a lot of great potential land projects in the area, and landowners to work with."

Bulay said the land trust also received \$800,000 in funding from OWEB to purchase an easement at the 9,000-acre Bennett Ranch in Baker County to protect sage grouse habitat.

The Canyon Creek Ranch easement is just one of 21 projects funded by OWEB in the

mid-Columbia region, totaling \$3.1 million. John Keith, executive director of the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts, applauded the grants, saying they will help to maintain the Oregon way of life for generations to come.

"Oregon is unique for many reasons, and one is the commitment Oregonians have made to conserve what's left," Keith said.

Other projects funded by OWEB include:

- \$103,687 to the North Fork John Day Watershed Council for restoration work on Granite Creek, reducing sediment and lowering water temperature flowing in to the Middle Fork John Day River.
- \$190,176 to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation for restoring the floodplain at Desolation Creek south of Ukiah.
- \$150,000 to the Morrow Soil and Water Conservation District to restore 240 acres of wetlands along the Columbia River between Umatilla and Irigon.

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