

ODFW Commission reviews Willamette Valley habitat partnership

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

CORVALLIS, Ore. — Members of the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission on Thursday toured the largest federally funded Wetland Reserve Program project on privately owned land in the Willamette Valley.

Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commissioner Dan Edge (right) reviews the Willamette Valley's largest habitat restoration project with AnneMary Myers, assistant wildlife biologist for ODFW's South Willamette Watershed District — ODFW photo. The 580-acre parcel, located in Linn County south of Brownsville, Ore., is owned by Pat and Stephanie Haggerty. Formerly managed as a grass seed farm, the entire property is being transformed into wildlife habitat under a unique partnership between the natural Resource Conservation Service, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Haggerty property was the first of three stops on a day long tour of ODFW's South Willamette Watershed District (SWWD) in conjunction with the Commission's April meeting in Corvallis. The project was highlighted as an example of the kinds of habitat improvement initiatives taking place in the Willamette Valley that support the Oregon Conservation Strategy.

Since a Memorandum of Understanding between ODFW and USFWS was approved six years ago, the two agencies have worked together to complete approximately 50 habitat conservation projects on more than 6,000 acres of private land across the Willamette Valley. Under the MOU, the two agencies are authorized to share and operate each other's equipment to improve wildlife habitat on private land. This arrangement is the only program of its kind in the state and one of only a few in the nation.

—“This is a good example of how partnerships can be used to restore wetland and prairie habitats and further goals of the Oregon Conservation Strategy,” said Steve Marx, SWWD manager. —“I see an opportunity to expand the relationship and scope of projects to include other types of native habitats.”

The South Willamette is currently the only watershed district in the state that has a crew dedicated to habitat restoration. The four-member team is comprised of biologists who are also certified heavy equipment operators. This unusual marriage of skills gives them a unique ability to see projects through from conception to completion.

“The crew members have the talent not only to assess field conditions, visualize the plan and lay it out on the computer but also to make job modifications if necessary,” said Jim Young SWWD habitat manager. “They understand the types of habitat they’re seeing when they’re operating a piece of equipment and avoid native species or remove invasives when necessary.”

This approach is a more streamlined and cost-effective way of going about habitat conservation and restoration, according to Marx. It is also finding a growing number of believers in the private sector.

“We do it all” from archaeological surveys and consultation with NOAA fisheries to operating equipment on the ground,” said Steve Smith of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “That is generating a lot of goodwill, which is extremely important in maintaining support for our conservation programs.”

With an estimated 96 percent of the Willamette Valley under private ownership, the cooperation of private landowners is essential to habitat conservation and recovery, according to Young. That’s why he devotes considerable time and effort to working with private landowners.

“It’s a consensus-building process,” he said. “The trick is to find the commonalities and build from there. The biggest thing you need to do is learn to listen and put yourself in the other person’s shoes.”

The commonalities between farmers, sportsmen, conservationists and resource managers often include an understanding of what makes nature tick and a love of the outdoors. Those were values that drove the Haggertys’ decision to turn their farm into a wetland.

“They love the environment and the resource and were looking for a way to preserve their property,” Young said.

From there, it was a matter of working out the details. By working with ODFW and USFWS to develop a habitat restoration plan, the Haggertys were able to sell a conservation easement to the National Resources Conservation Service. They were paid the appraised agricultural or “yellow book” value of the property while retaining the rights to access and recreational use of the land. ODFW and USFWS crews re-created 150 acres of seasonal marsh, planted 150 acres around the perimeter in with hardwood trees and shrubs and the remaining 280 acres with native grasses, forbs and sedges.

Young said the Haggerty project is a good example of how collaboration and cooperation can produce significant benefits for both landowners and wildlife. He noted that the property is already being utilized by all kinds of wildlife, including pheasants, meadow larks, geese and other species.

Commissioner Dan Edge was impressed with what he saw on the tour.

“The Haggertys have made quite a commitment to habitat out here,” said Edge. “This looks great, guys, good job.”

Members of the commission also visited Thompson’s Mills, where they received an overview of fish passage and habitat issues associated with the historic mill and Sodom Dam. The last stop on their tour was the Oregon Hatchery Research Center in Alsea, where they looked at the facilities and reviewed a project aimed at tagging fish with acoustic radio tags to monitor freshwater migration timing and ocean survival.

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