

Landowner Partnerships in Restoration Projects

Deep gratitude to all of the landowners and project sponsors that contributed to this article, and more importantly, improved habitat across the Pacific Northwest.

Picture this: a major river flows from its headwaters out to sea, fed by tributaries that deliver cold, clear, unpolluted water. Traveling down the river, you can't discern where one riverfront property ends and the next begins because the riparian zone is well connected and healthy. Salmon leap beneath you as they make the trip upriver to spawn and eagles lurk nearby, ready to feast on the wasted carcasses.

This scene exists in few places outside of mountainous tributary streams, too remote for development. However, work is underway to restore many watersheds to a state that is healthy enough to sustain the species that define our region, as well as support the agricultural systems vital to community health by supporting pollinators, stabilizing stream banks, filtering excess nutrients and pesticides, and promoting groundwater recharge.

This critical work depends upon willing landowners from all different backgrounds to make projects happen, and this requires trust. When it comes to sectioning off a part of their land for habitat restoration, some landowners have questions, needs and concerns. The stories below are from landowners who worked through their reservations and eventually came to host successful habitat restoration projects, with the support of local riparian enhancement groups.



Water Conflict Management Class field trip. Photo Credit: Marys River Watershed Council

LANDOWNER NAMES:
Chris and Julia Hickey

PROJECT SPONSOR:
Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership

RIVER/STREAM REACH:
Gibbons Creek, part of Steigerwald Reconnection Project



Tell us about the project that you hosted.

We granted an easement to Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership (LCEP) that allowed them to remove two bridges and a dam on the stretch of the creek that ran through our property. The crew also replaced one of the bridges. They also removed what some folks have called the largest bamboo forest in the Portland metro area and replaced it with native plants. We are also a part of the dike setback that happened; the former dike along the Columbia River was removed and the new dike now ends in our backyard. It's not that

noticeable but it did change the layout and feel of our property.

What were your initial reservations about hosting a restoration project on your land?

The head dam that previously existed allowed us to pull water to irrigate our property, so with the proposal to remove it we were worried that we wouldn't be able to irrigate things as we once had. We were also worried about losing the wind protection and privacy screening that the bamboo forest provided, as well as damage that might occur to the large trees and old growth rhododendrons on our property as the construction got underway.

What were the deciding factors that informed your participation or changed your mind?

LCEP purchased an easement, which allowed the project to take place while we retained ownership of the property. The easement doesn't allow the public to access our property, and it lets us stay here and enjoy the wildlife that we hope will come back to the area with access to better habitat. We were also very involved in planning which native plants would be installed so that we could preserve our view and still have a privacy and sound barrier.

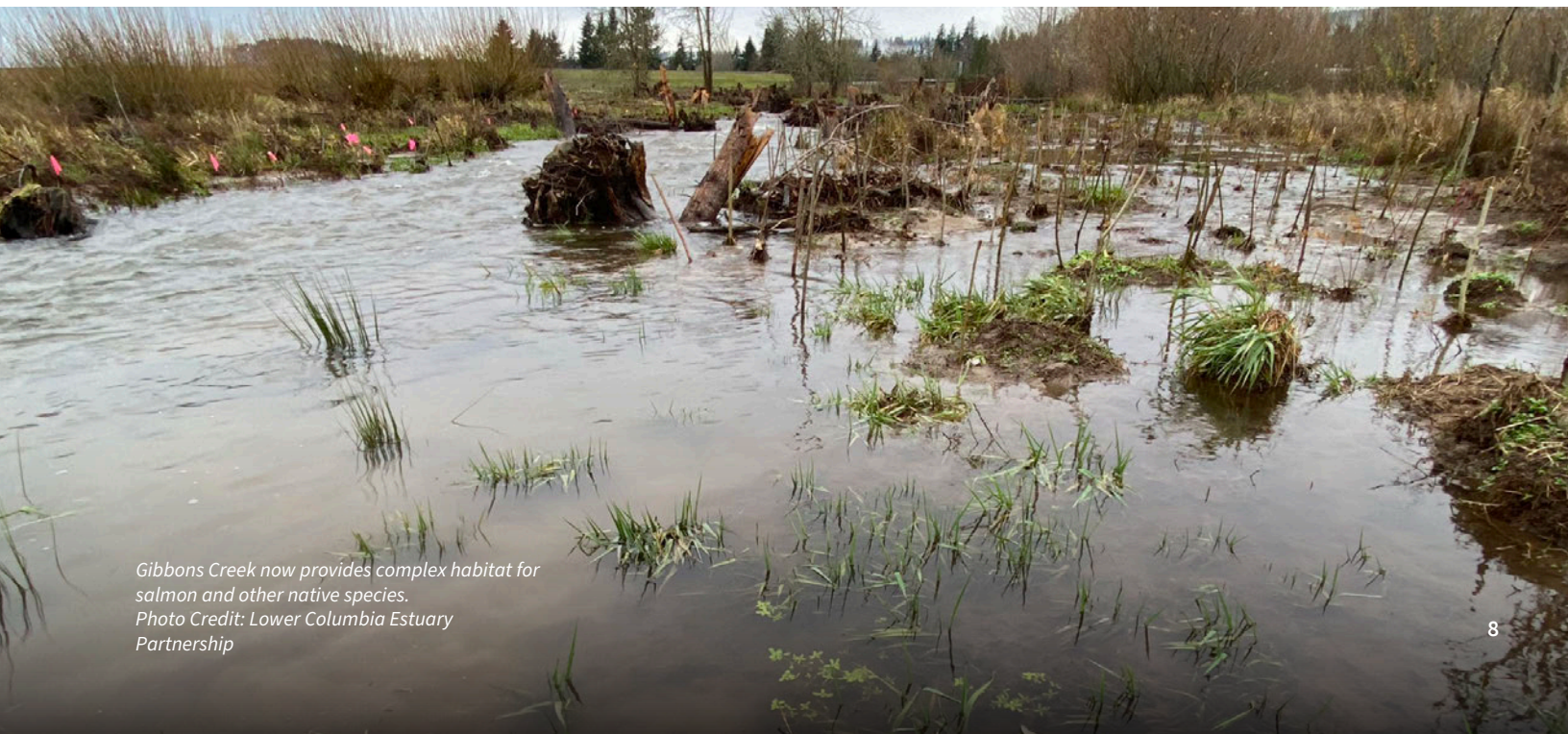
The crew was able to do all of their work without affecting a pond that we have on site, which was important to us. They also avoided damaging the large trees on our property, and even transplanted the 70 year old rhododendrons that are now thriving in their new spot.

How do you feel about the project now that it's been completed?

I feel lucky, I feel privileged. We went from having an out of control bamboo forest and a field and stream full of blackberries to a restored creek that's closer to its natural condition. It had been bulldozed into a channel, and now it's flowing freely. The beavers will come in and build dams, and I hope it will turn into something special. In the long run, I hope that anyone who lives here after us will enjoy seeing chinook and steelhead spawn in the creek rather than having the bamboo forest that was here before.

What advice do you have for other landowners who are on the fence about hosting a restoration project?

I would say document all of your concerns, and then allow the team to address them. The project managers were very receptive to all of the concerns that we have, so once we brought them up they addressed every one.



*Gibbons Creek now provides complex habitat for salmon and other native species.
Photo Credit: Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership*

LANDOWNER NAME:
Tisa Wecht, landowner

PROJECT SPONSOR:
Marys River Watershed Council

RIVER OR STREAM:
Shotpouch Creek



Tell us about the project that you hosted.

The Watershed Council reached out to us a number of years ago to have a meeting about potential projects. I was very hesitant because it sounded too good to be true. Eventually, we sorted things out and they did a project that included large wood placement in the creek, bank pull backs to naturalize the slope, a bridge replacement, native plantings, off channel livestock watering system installation, and livestock fencing installation. Altogether around 8 acres were planted. We have been so happy with the project, and have talked with lots of other landowners, youth, research groups, and so many other folks about

what worked well and what we might have done differently.

What were your initial reservations about hosting the project?

At first I was suspicious that this was a ploy to take the land, or restrict my use of it. We also had some pushback from livestock operators who leased the land. The project really seemed too good to be true, so I thought there had to be some kind of catch.

What were the deciding factors that informed your participation or changed your mind?

I talked a lot with the folks at Marys Watershed Council about how the stream was functioning, and how it was supposed to function. It was very incised, which was actually causing parts of the bank to fall off every year, and I was losing between 2 and 5 feet of pasture land every winter when it flooded. They provided me with so much great information and resources so I could understand how to utilize the natural floodplain.

The Watershed Council folks also let me tour past projects that they've done, which was helpful to see how it all

comes together. That experience also encouraged me to volunteer to be a showcase property for other landowners to come and see how projects actually look on the ground and speak candidly to them about what the process is like. I really like being able to do this because I have witnessed incredible changes to the water and I will always support it.

How do you feel about the project now that it's been completed?

We are very happy with the project. It has been great to see the wildlife come back to the creek; we have a resident kingfisher that didn't come around before, which tells me there are fish for them to eat. We've seen all kinds of wildlife that weren't there before: herons, raccoons, cutthroat trout in the creek.

What advice do you have for other landowners who are on the fence about hosting a restoration project?

I would advise landowners to attend the meetings and really listen to the people who will actually be doing the work, to walk the creek with the project managers and hear what it is they are thinking about. They can get into the specific concerns that you have and talk about how to address them in the project.

Bank Pull Back Progression. Photo Credit: Marys Watershed Council



LANDOWNER NAME:

Steve Van Grunsven, Farmer, Agronomist, and TSWCD Board Member

PROJECT SPONSOR:

Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District

RIVER OR STREAM:

Dairy Creek



Tell us about the project that you hosted.

We partnered with Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District (TSWCD) to host a 12 acre riparian enhancement project on our farm on Dairy Creek. We sectioned off areas of marginal farmland, primarily in frequently flooded areas to establish a buffer that varies from 50’ to 150’. The District considers it a 12 acre project, but I really think of it as only using up 3 or 4 acres of viable farmland since so much of it was in areas that we can’t use for perennial crops. The project also included an 8’ herbaceous pollinator plant buffer between the riparian area and the active farmland, which allows us to farm right up to the border of the project area without having to account for tree and

shrub roots, or deal with shading and debris that can come from trees.

What were your initial reservations about hosting the project?

Prior to me taking over the operation, my father-in-law operated the farm. He was also on the board of TSWCD, but during that time the economics didn’t pencil out — it would have been a financial loss to take these areas out of production and enroll them in a riparian protection or enhancement program. We also have some uncertainties of what the farm will look like in the future, so committing to any long term project carries some risk for us.

Through my work as an agronomist, I’ve talked with other farmers who are fairly hesitant to engage with government organizations because of the strings that are often attached to various funding sources. It’s also important to remember that farmers and habitat restoration folks may be operating under different definitions on a lot of the touch points in these projects. For example, the weeds that the TSWCD are concerned about in their project areas may be different from weeds that someone growing crops wants to keep out of their fields. If someone is growing a seed crop and 1% of that crop is contaminated, that’s a loss in value for that product. I brought a list of weeds to Mike, the project manager, and he shared concerns on

about half of the plants on that list. However, he heard me out and made considerations for the weeds that could affect our operation, that he otherwise wouldn’t have tried to control on the project site.

What were the deciding factors that informed your participation or changed your mind?

We’re lucky in the Tualatin Basin to have a well funded Soil and Water Conservation District. Thanks to a combination of state and federal dollars, as well as a large tax base, we are able to offer compensation for enrollment in projects that protect and enhance riparian areas. These payments allowed us to justify taking the areas we enrolled out of active production, while providing habitat benefits for fish, pollinators and other wildlife. Trust in staff at the district has also been a large motivating factor for me. I know they do good work, and are willing to hear out my concerns to design a project that works for everyone.

The TSWCD also offers contracts of different lengths, and I really appreciated that flexibility. It’s hard to say what farming here will look like in 30 years, so being able to re-evaluate things when our contract is up after 10 years gives us the ability to decide if it’s still the right program for us or consider changes that could be made.

How do you feel about the project now that it’s been completed?

I feel like it’s been working well. I have really great communication with staff at TSWCD and have appreciated their willingness to make the project work with my needs.

What advice do you have for other landowners who are on the fence about hosting a restoration project?

Communication is key. The Conservation District staff are interested in what is valuable to you as a landowner, and they’re willing to take your needs into account. They have their own goals related to watershed protection, but there is almost always a middle ground that can be found between the farmers and the district.



Herbaceous pollinator strips make good neighbors. Pictured is the strip of pollinator habitat that provides a flexible management areas between the riparian zone and Steve’s farm land. Photo Credit: Mike Conroy

Data Backed Engagement

Several local watershed restoration groups have sought to determine what motivates landowners to participate in restoration projects, and what barriers to participation exist. To do so, they have conducted interviews with landowners in their areas covering a range of topics to better understand attitudes toward riparian restoration. These factors vary significantly based on local conditions, politics and resources, and the studies discussed below were not designed in a way as to draw conclusions to the larger population, however they may provide a helpful starting point for other groups hoping to dig into more focused landowner engagement.

In the Tualatin Basin, the Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District (TSWCD) commissioned a Program Opportunities Report, which was prepared by Stamberger Outreach Consulting. This place based survey of landowners with streamside property found that participants reported natural beauty and wildlife as the elements they valued most about their land, with privacy and historic connection to land also coming up as common values.

TSWCD also gathered responses from landowners who were currently enrolled in one or more of their riparian enhancement programs. The major incentives for participation in these programs were help from TSWCD with vegetation management, protecting

clean water, improving fish and wildlife habitat, and preserving natural resources for future generations. Landowners who had not participated in programs were also surveyed, and while the sample size was too small to draw representative conclusions, responses to barriers to participation may provide opportunities for further exploration. The top barriers this group cited were concerns about government rules and regulations, complicated paperwork and enrollment processes, and uncertainty about project effectiveness.

A similar report was commissioned by Skagit Conservation District in Washington, which was funded by the Department of Ecology and designed by Triangle Associates and Peak Sustainability Group. The goal of this study was to gather insight that would help design a pilot program for voluntary landowner restoration projects in which the needs and desires of landowners define the structure of the program. After reviewing relevant literature surrounding landowner engagement, the study leads pursued interviews using principles of community based social marketing to understand the underlying assumptions, perceptions, attitudes, preferences, motivations, and barriers that impact why people make the decisions and choices that they make. They targeted landowners or land workers associated with property on streams or tributaries to the Skagit River where summer water

temperatures reach levels that exceed what is hospitable to salmonids.

The report identified several common motivations for and barriers to participating in habitat enhancement projects. The top goal that participants cited was maintaining agricultural productivity on their land, followed by providing habitat for wildlife. Financial incentives to compensate for lost productivity or farm revenue was number one motivating factor for participation. Interviewees also stated they would be more likely to participate if funding or labor was available for project maintenance.

The barriers that respondents identified were fixed streamside vegetation widths they perceived to be inflexible in the programs currently available to them, complexity of enrollment processes, distrust or skepticism of government organizations, a feeling of a lack of autonomy over the land, and a lack of available funding for project maintenance.

Specific programs vary from watershed to watershed, and intersect with all kinds of political differences, economic disparities, cultural norms, historic relationship to land and more. By understanding the specific forces at work in any given place, and the common themes that cross boundaries, project proponents may be able to knit together the kind of habitat that is needed for an uncertain future.



Photo Credit: Marys River Watershed Council