

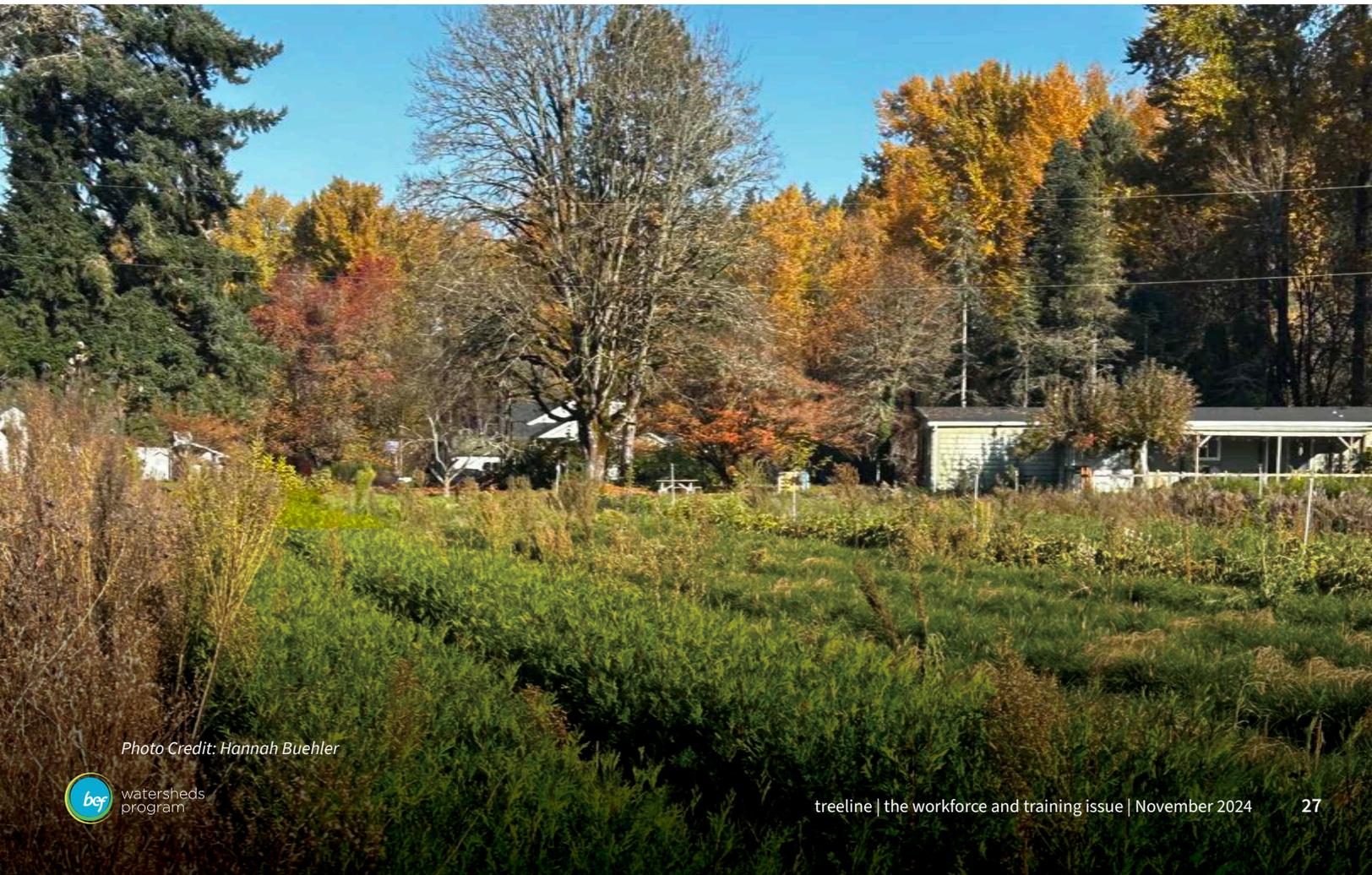
# Lessons Learned From the Willamette Model Watershed Partnership

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Between 2009 and 2019, the Willamette River Initiative's Model Watershed Program with funding from Meyer Memorial Trust (MMT) set out to accelerate the pace and scale of restoration in the Willamette Valley by investing in Watershed Council capacity. In Oregon, Watershed Councils are small, community based organizations that advance on the ground habitat restoration to support clean water and healthy habitats for people and nature.

The willingness of MMT to invest funds over a ten year period, coupled with the enthusiasm and commitment of riparian practitioners led to a unique and highly successful systems approach to restoration that continues today. We can draw several lessons from this approach that may be instructive for other groups looking for ways to scale riparian restoration and protection, which are explored below.

See a detailed report on the achievements of the Willamette Model Watershed Partnership [here](#).



*Photo Credit: Hannah Buehler*

## 1. Relationships and Trust Are Key

Relationships with landowners, funders, contractors, community members and peers are the glue that holds the restoration system together, and these take time and energy to develop and nurture. In a funding environment that celebrates metrics like acres restored and trees planted, it can be very difficult to fund the slow and hard to measure work of building relationships. When funders trust that practitioners know how to best advance their work and include things like landowner outreach in funding agreements, and will follow through on commitments, then real progress can be made. Some landowners need a lot of time, resources, and conversations to agree to host a project, but the rewards for sustained engagement can be larger or more complex projects, more community support, a greater sense of connection, and more.

One real time response to the plant shortage driven by the increase in work by Model Watershed partners was the development of the **Collaborative Grow program** in 2011. Through this program, Bonneville Environmental Foundation holds contract growing agreements with a network of Oregon nurseries, and acts as a centralized ordering hub for organizations that implement restoration projects that can provide additional services such as allocating plants when projects experience disruptions, spreading the impacts of unanticipated shortages, tracking issues with particular species etc. The contracts with nurseries provide order estimates three years ahead of time to inform seed collection and nursery bed layout. Regions have unique needs and resources and this may not be a replicable model for other locations.

## 2. A Rapid Increase in Restoration Will Strain Existing Supply Chains

The work of restoration is supported by a network of implementation contractors, nurseries, seed collectors, restoration crews, planning and outreach staff and more. Organizations and businesses adjust to supply and demand trends, but managing change can take time, and can be difficult without long term assurance of stable funding.

The infusion of dollars into the system in the Willamette led to a scramble for tools to manage information, willing landowners, staff, plants, vehicles, tools, crews, and more to meet the demand. Knowing that this ripple effect is coming may help organizations prepare, but private businesses typically need secured orders or contracts to comfortably increase staff or production.

## 3. Flexible Funding Can Lead to Systems That Sustain

The ten year investment in the Willamette River Watershed by MMT was unique in the world of restoration. Many restoration funds are awarded on a project by project basis, and require leveraged funding to support project development, partnership building, outreach and long term follow up. As mentioned above, the work of cultivating relationships with private landowners to host projects is both necessary and time consuming. Project based grants are also often dispersed over a limited time horizon, most of the time shorter than the 5-10 years it takes to plan, prepare, implement, and maintain riparian projects.

With the funding from MMT, Watershed Council staff were able to engage meaningfully and consistently with landowners, conduct project prep and maintenance, build coalitions of stakeholder groups, fund time to write additional grants, engage the community, and more. By funding the programmatic work that is vital to sustaining habitat restoration and protection, Watershed Councils have been able to effectively scale their work and move forward meaningful ecological and social gains.



Photo Credit: Hannah Buehler

## Achievements of the 10 Year Willamette Model Watersheds Partnership



**815 acres**  
over 52 river miles of riparian planting

**640 acres**  
of wetland and floodplains restored, delivering benefits totalling over \$5M

**86**  
fish passage barriers removed, allowing access to 140+ miles of stream

**300 acres**  
of upland prairie and oak woodlands restored

**4M trees**  
and shrubs planted by 20+ partner organizations

**6 nurseries**  
contracted to supply 45 native woody species

**905**  
landowners engaged resulting in access and project agreements

**3250**  
Restoration advanced over 3250 total acres

**2775**  
youth and 1982 adults engaged in field education and events

“If we can’t play the long-game, we can’t get complex projects with multiple landowners done.”

- Clinton Begley, former Executive Director of the Long Tom Watershed Council

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#### 4. Emphasize Quality Over Quantity

When the opportunity to participate in the Model Watershed Partnership arose, some partner Councils tried to spread the funding from MMT and other grant programs as far as they could by implementing more low cost projects, instead of investing in the full costs associated with designing, implementing and maintaining projects. They engaged volunteers to plant trees and relied on landowners to conduct maintenance to stretch grant dollars. Holly Purpura, Executive Director of Marys River Watershed Council shared “the push to spread the funding as thin as possible to fund more work on the ground has created numerous difficulties for the Council that have lingered long after this push shifted. The Council is still working to catch up with the backlog of projects.”

The inclination to spread funding further over the landscape can also be pushed by funders explicitly or implicitly through things like scoring criteria, reporting metrics, and the types of projects that are celebrated as examples. Riparian restoration is a professional practice that is informed by traditional knowledge, science, and peer learning. By trying to achieve more with less, we run the risk of undervaluing the people who make up this system, and perpetuating patterns that lead to burnout.



Doug fir plugs at Kintigh Mountain Farm.  
Photo Credit: Hannah Buehler