



Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund: Sheep Creek Stewardship Project

Project Completion Report

Trout Unlimited's Sheep Creek Stewardship Project was completed during the 2023 and 2024 field seasons. This work occurred across 4.5 miles of Sheep Creek on public lands managed by the Wallowa Whitman National Forest and the Bureau of Land Management Vale District. Sheep Creek is a major tributary of the Upper Grande Ronde River and is a high priority regionally for restoration because of its importance to steelhead, Chinook salmon, bull trout, Pacific lamprey, and numerous other aquatic and terrestrial species.

The project team worked with hand crews using OCRF funds to install 50 beaver dam analogs (BDAs) throughout the project area, and led a volunteers to plant 350 native riparian hardwoods. This work included construction of additional BDAs, mechanical restoration treatments such as channel fill and LWD placement, conifer thinning, fence construction, and an extensive planting effort. This work has already greatly improved habitat conditions at Sheep Creek. The stream has now been reconnected with its floodplain and an extensive network of side channels, wetlands, alcoves, and pools. The BDAs are playing an important role, by creating quality pool habitat and pushing water into the floodplain. The now-wetted valley bottom is an excellent environment for riparian hardwoods like willows, alders, and dogwoods to thrive. So far, survival rates for plants planted in 2023 have been upwards of 90%. This is a sign that the ecosystem is recovering and will soon be able to support beaver populations that will help engineer a self-sustaining ecosystem. The project team has anecdotally observed marked increases in waterfowl, and Columbia spotted frog, indicating that these species are already benefiting from the vast increase in wetland habitat at Sheep Creek.

TU staff completed this work with the help of two youth corps crews, and one crew from Anabran Solutions, a contractor specializing in low-tech process-based restoration. In total, the project engaged 11 young adults (ages 18-25) from the youth corps from many different backgrounds, and 6 crewmembers from Anabran. These crewmembers received hands-on training in restoration techniques, learning about aquatic ecosystems while working hard and camping near the project site. Several youth corps members remarked that it was their hardest project of the summer, but was by far their favorite, and had sparked an interest in beavers, fish, and watershed science. One youth corps member eventually changed his major in order to study restoration. TU staff also led a volunteer planting day, which engaged 12 members of local

communities. The volunteers spent the day planting 350 riparian shrubs while learning about the Sheep Creek project.

While project implementation went relatively smoothly, we were challenged by the extreme wildfire season in 2024. Thankfully, the project area wasn't impacted directly by any fires, but the project team did have to contend with restrictions on chainsaws and power tools. We'd like to thank the USFS staff of the La Grande Ranger District for working with us to obtain waivers and ensure that the project could still be completed safely and on schedule. The ongoing partnership between Trout Unlimited and the Wallowa Whitman National Forest has been critical to project success.

