Project Accomplishments

Oregon Hunters Association's Southwest Cascades Meadow Protection Project (OCRF Grant 2023-30) improved protection of 480 acres of sensitive wet meadow habitat and approximately 400 acres of spring-fed water resources associated with the Big Butte Springs Municipal Watershed. OHA contributed 675 volunteer hours alone toward the completion of this project, and hundreds of staff hours were contributed by OHA, USFS, ODFW and Medford Water Commission.

Approximately 6.5 miles of new wildlife-friendly fencing were installed, and 6.5 miles of deteriorated and dysfunctional fencing were removed at three project locations:

- Short Creek Prairie (42.33828 -122.38332)
- Willow Prairie (42.40468 -122.3943)
- Whiskey Springs/Fourbit (42.49539, -122.41667)

The new fencing was constructed using wildlife-friendly specifications while providing effective livestock exclusion. Fences consist of four strands of wire, with smooth, barbless wire on the top and bottom strands. The bottom wire was installed approximately 16-18 inches above ground level to facilitate wildlife passage, while the top wire was maintained at or below 42 inches to allow ungulates to safely cross. Importantly, the top strand was kept 12 inches from the second highest strand to reduce or eliminate hoof entanglements.

Reflective fence markers were installed between T-posts to increase fence visibility and reduce the potential for wildlife-fence conflicts. These fences are termed let-down fences and they were incorporated to facilitate wildlife movement when livestock are absent and reduce potential damage from heavy winter snow. OHA and the USFS will continue to monitor and maintain the fencing to ensure its long-term effectiveness.

Habitat and Wildlife Benefits

The completed resource protection measures reduce livestock impacts to meadow vegetation, springs, and streams. Excluding livestock from sensitive areas reduces hoof disturbance and sedimentation and allows native plant communities to recover, improving vegetation diversity and forage quality. Protection of stream and spring vegetation also helps buffer inputs, cycle nutrients, maintain water quality, and provide food, cover, and breeding habitat for wildlife.

The completed project benefits a diverse assemblage of State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) species of greatest conservation need as well as special-status species, including migratory birds, owls, amphibians, bats, carnivores, pollinators, and small mammals. Benefiting species include great gray owl, northern spotted owl, flammulated owl, olive-sided flycatcher, sandhill crane, northern goshawk, Cascades frog, western toad, gray wolf, Pacific fisher, ringtail, and multiple bat species.

The project provides particularly important benefits to Franklin's bumble bee, a federally endangered species, by reducing livestock impacts and improving meadow conditions and flowering plant resources. Short Creek Prairie contains the largest Mardon skipper butterfly population on USFS land in southern Oregon and is a high-priority site for protection. Reducing livestock and unauthorized vehicle impacts helps maintain habitat conditions needed by these species.

The project also protects aspen woodland habitat within the project areas. Aspen provides nesting and hiding cover, invertebrate prey, and forage for numerous wildlife species, including birds, bats, deer, elk, grouse, beaver, and other mammals.

Measures of Success and Long-Term Benefits

Project effectiveness will be evaluated through ongoing USFS and ODFW monitoring. Measures include changes in meadow vegetation diversity and forage quality, occupancy and use by special-status and SWAP species, and the effectiveness of fencing in reducing livestock impacts. The project also addresses the specific management concerns identified in the SWAP by reducing unauthorized off-highway vehicle access at Short Creek Prairie and reducing livestock overutilization at Short Creek Prairie, Willow Prairie, and Whiskey Springs/Fourbit. The completed infrastructure provides a foundation for long-term improvement in meadow condition, water-resource protection, and wildlife habitat.

Public Access, Education, and Outdoor Equity

The project provides continued benefits to the public using the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest for camping, hiking, hunting, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, and other recreational activities. Willow Prairie is associated with a 19-mile trail system, while Whiskey Springs/Fourbit provides camping and other recreational opportunities. Improved fencing also addresses public concerns regarding livestock entering the Whiskey Springs Horse Camp.

The project supports outdoor equity through volunteer, education, workforce training, and employment opportunities for youth, underserved communities, and tribal members. The work complements the longstanding USFS partnership with many organizations including the Lomakatsi Restoration Project, which provides hands-on natural-resource training and employment opportunities. The USFS also incorporates the project into existing outdoor education, internship, job-shadowing, and volunteer opportunities. Several interns were involved in this project form multiple agencies. Public education was supported through installation of 24-by-36-inch bilingual interpretive signs at project locations. The signs, provided in English and Spanish, describe the importance of protecting West Cascade meadow systems and the project's benefits to wildlife, water resources, and recreation.

Partner Contributions and Overall Outcome

The project was strengthened through collaboration among OHA, USFS, ODFW, Medford Water Commission, and other partners. Medford Water Commission contributed approximately $6,000 in materials and supplies toward a portion of the Whiskey Springs/Fourbit fence installation.

Overall, the project successfully completed its primary resource protection objectives by replacing approximately 6.5 miles of deteriorated fencing, improving wildlife passage and fence visibility, reducing livestock and unauthorized vehicle impacts, and protecting 480 acres of wet meadow habitat and 400 acres of spring-fed watershed resources. The completed improvements provide long-term conservation benefits by improving meadow vegetation and water-resource protection while enhancing habitat for special-status and SWAP species. The project also provided public education, recreation, workforce-development, and outdoor-equity benefits that will support continued conservation of West Cascade meadow systems.