

Spring/Summer 2021

The Confluence

Newsletter of the Rogue River Watershed

South Obenchain Fire: Working Toward Future Resiliency

by Meghan Montgomery

On September 8, 2020, wildfires in Northern California and across Oregon, whipped up into enormous infernos by a historic wind event, threatened homes, businesses, lives, and ecosystems crucial for our livelihoods. While the Almeda Fire captured public attention due to its destruction of thousands of homes and businesses at the core of the Rogue Valley, it was not the only fire raging in the Rogue River watershed. The South Obenchain Fire ignited that same day. Over the following weeks, it burned approximately 32,500 acres across seven streamsheds in the Middle Rogue, about half being private lands and the other managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). While the South Obenchain Fire destroyed fewer homes and infrastructure than the Almeda Fire, it burned with high severity and at a scale that will have long-lasting implications for forest, stream, and community resiliency.

By the time the South Obenchain Fire was reported—at 1:59 pm on September 8—almost all wildfire and public safety resources had been dispatched to the Almeda Fire. This left an enormous responsibility for firefighters with Jackson County Fire District 3, Oregon Department of Forestry, the BLM, and private landowners themselves. Over the first three days of the fire, landowners on Butte Falls Highway jumped on any piece of equipment they could find to defend their homes and those of their neighbors, earning themselves the nickname, “Logger Militia.” These landowners have invaluable knowledge of the local landscape and access points to create firebreaks that were instrumental to saving homes, resources, and lives.



Photo by M. Montgomery

Southwest side of the South Obenchain fire

Over the months that followed the fire, Jackson Soil and Water Conservation District (JSWCD) led a collaboration of partner organizations and impacted landowners to identify restoration priorities and resources. Partners and landowners were particularly concerned about the impacts to Little Butte Creek and Reese Creek, both of which flow into the Rogue River just above the intake for the Medford Water Commission (MWC) water treatment plant, which supplies drinking water to more than 34,000 valley households during summer months. To protect both drinking water quality and aquatic habitat from excess sedimentation and other pollutants, JSWCD staff met on-site with nearly fifty landowners to assess

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RRWC's mission: Stewardship of the Rogue River watershed through restoration, education, and community involvement.

RRWC is tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and a recognized watershed council. Watershed councils were authorized by the Oregon Legislature in 1995 to promote and implement voluntary cooperative conservation actions.

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Notes from the Executive Director's Desk

I love “firsts.” Sometimes the outcome hurts. But they are incredibly refreshing.

I have supervised employees for about half of my 27-year career. In early April, I experienced a “first.” Donna, our Community Engagement and Outreach Program Manager and orchestrator of *The Confluence*, let me know that she had run the math three times and determined that she could retire. Moreover, she was ready to retire.



Photo by Justin Clifton

This particular “first” challenges the “incredibly refreshing” part of paragraph one. It certainly hurt. Donna and I share a sense of humor and tongue in cheek style of looking at the world. We have similar writing styles and well-matched vocabularies. Back in the age of dinosaurs when the Rogue River Watershed Council staff worked from an office every day (you remember 2019, don't you?), Donna and I were frequently the last two in the office; we'd close things down by retelling stories about clean soybean fields in the corn belt, pork tenderloin sandwiches, Oxford commas (if you're scanning ahead, you'll see that I'm a fan [Donna is not]), and the perils of living by the motto, “If it's not too late to start working on a project, chances are it's too early.”

Of course, I'm happy for Donna as she steps away from the “work world” and into days where she can dictate exactly what she wants to do (and when—which will be sometime around 2:00 AM). As we scramble to wrap up those projects on Donna's desk that can be wrapped up (and organize and document the others so someone else can “bring them home”), it's hard to imagine how much I'll miss those end-of-the-day discussions and arguments over commas. But they will be missed. And I suspect you will miss Donna's flair for writing as you peruse the next issue of this newsletter and the “Friends' Updates” that you receive periodically.

And here is where we get to the refreshing part of things. Once we've celebrated Donna's retirement and wished her well in her next, entirely self-directed adventures, the Rogue River Watershed Council will seek a new staff member to continue Donna's good work of engaging the citizens of Wolf Creek and Eagle Point, Butte Falls and Medford, Shady Cove and Grants Pass, and all points in between. It will look, read, sound, and feel different. And it will build on the solid foundation established over the past six years, engaging, exciting, and challenging our communities to embrace complex habitats, restored natural processes, clean water, and healthy wildlife populations.

Change is coming. And we will embrace it. Before it arrives, however, please join me in thanking Donna for all her hard work since August 2015. She deserves it.

South Obenchain Fire: Working Toward Resiliency (Continued from Page 1)

burn severity and recommend actions to guide restoration. JSWCD also provided materials to establish vegetation and prevent erosion along ephemeral and perennial tributaries to streams impacted by the fire. In a partnership with Oregon Department of Forestry, the District was able to work with 11 separate landowners to conduct post-fire forestry work, treating remaining hazardous fuels, widening fire breaks and defensible space, and mitigating future losses from pine bark beetles on 145 acres of private lands.

While these actions may seem limited in scale compared to the size and severity of the fire, they were targeted to address the highest priorities for restoration and fire resiliency. More importantly, they have allowed Jackson SWCD and partners to build strong relationships with the Butte Falls community. The District intends to build on this trust in coming years, expanding their work to enhance forest and community resiliency to wildfire in an area of the Rogue Basin critical to broader ecosystem health and quality of life in the watershed.



Photo by M. Montgomery

High severity burn along Kanutchan Creek

Meghan Montgomery is the Agricultural Resource Conservationist for Jackson Soil and Water Conservation District. She works with landowners to solve natural resource challenges related to agricultural production and forest and ecosystem health.

RRWC PROJECT PROFILE

Almeda Fire Private Lands Response

The Almeda Drive fire burned through the Bear Creek Watershed in early September. The communities of Phoenix and Talent, Oregon, were devastated. The fire destroyed over 2,800 structures and burned through the riparian areas of Bear Creek and its tributaries, resulting in extreme water quality concerns,



including threats to the supply for downstream drinking water providers and to the riparian and aquatic plant and wildlife communities. Rogue River Watershed Council applied for and was awarded Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) funds to leverage work already completed on public lands. As such, RRWC has contacted landowners of high-priority private lands and is developing site plans to address water quality impacts and implementing best management practices on those properties.

We have contracted Lomakatsi Restoration Project to do much of the fire remediation work on these lands. Lomakatsi had supported Jackson County

Parks by mulching, installing wattles, and hand seeding along most of the streamside areas within the Almeda Fire footprint on public lands in October and November. Their knowledge of the landscape, experience with the necessary practices, and relationships with RRWC and other partnering organizations have been invaluable in meeting timing needs and project efficiency.

RRWC PROJECT PREVIEW

Upper Rogue Water Quality Initiative Planning Project

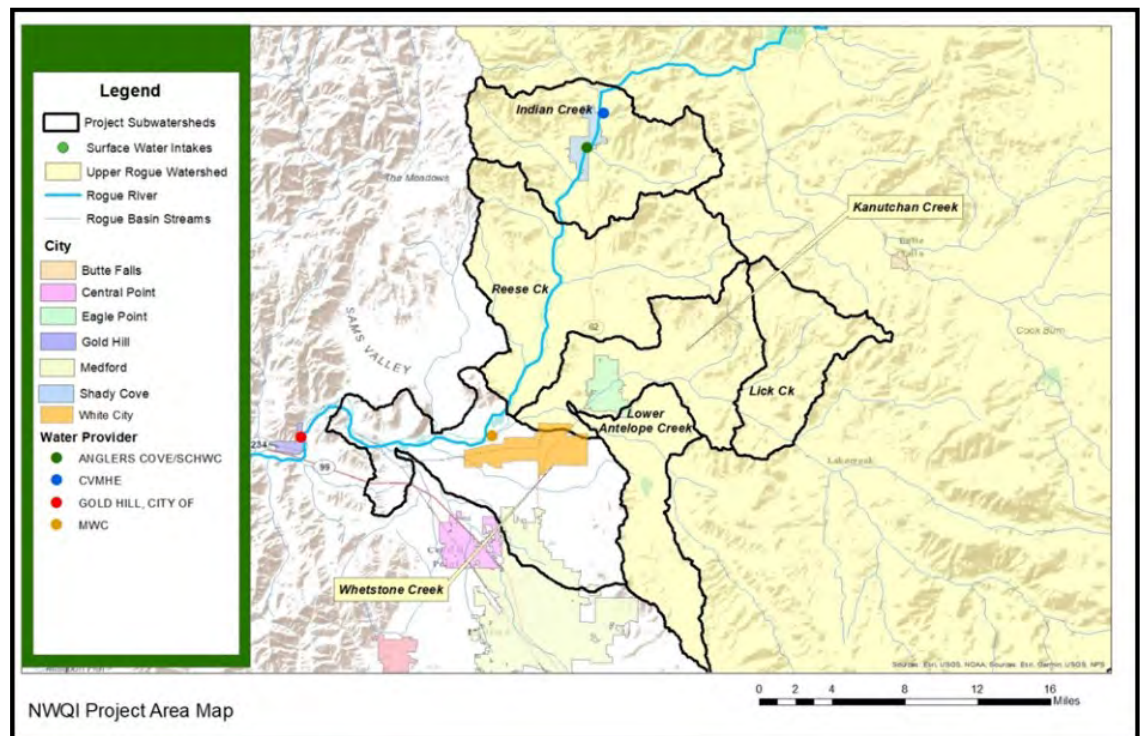
Rogue River Watershed Council, on behalf of the Rogue Drinking Water Partnership (RDWP), applied for and was awarded a Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) National Water Quality Initiative Grant. As USDA's premiere water quality initiative, NWQI provides a way to accelerate voluntary, on-farm conservation investments and focused water quality monitoring and assessment resources where they can deliver the greatest benefits for clean water.

Now in its tenth year, the National Water Quality Initiative is a partnership among NRCS, state water quality agencies, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency formed to identify and address impaired water bodies through voluntary conservation. NRCS provides targeted funding for financial and technical assistance in small watersheds most in need and where farmers can use conservation practices to make a difference.

Conservation systems include practices that promote soil health, reduce erosion, and lessen nutrient runoff, such as filter strips, cover crops, reduced tillage, and manure management. These practices benefit natural resources and enhance agricultural productivity and profitability by improving soil health and optimizing the use of agricultural inputs.

State water quality agencies and other partners contribute additional resources for watershed planning, implementation, and outreach. They also provide resources for monitoring efforts that help track water quality improvements over time.

The RDWP NWQI project area encompasses 148,273 acres and includes six small watersheds: Lower Antelope, Whetstone, Reece, Lick, Kanutchan, and Indian Creek. The project area was chosen following collaborative discussions with members of the RDWP, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, and the NRCS. The project



area starts at the Rogue River upstream of Shady Cove and extends downstream past the old Gold Ray Dam site. The project area is located almost entirely in the 783,300-acre Upper Rogue Watershed, which represents approximately 25% of the Rogue Basin.

This collaborative effort will last 18 months and result in a source water protection plan that addresses water quality resource concerns within the project area. The plan will provide the necessary information to support the infusion of additional implementation dollars to address the identified concerns.

SPECIES SPOTLIGHT

Western Toad

by Jade Keehn

In the damp creeks and shallow waters of Southern Oregon, state officials are donning sterile gloves and pulling on special PVC suits as they fight against the clock, searching for answers in a strange missing person case spanning the Western states and beyond into Canada.

The missing person—well, it's not a person at all. We're looking for western toads, but in this neighborhood, they may be referred to by their alias: the "boreal toad" (*Anaxyrus boreas boreas*). And the special gear? That's critical protection for amphibians like toads that are vulnerable to fungal infections and other diseases. Sterile equipment helps against one of the prime suspects in our case: fungal infections and diseases.

Boreal toads return each spring to the same breeding sites (sunny shallows of wetlands, ponds, lakes, and slow-moving streams), and in bygone years one could find toads in these communal breeding aggregations as reliably as rain in Seattle. Females lay long strings of eggs, and within two months these eggs mature into hundreds (even thousands) of toadlets. Only the fittest toadlets among them survive to join the family business of eating invertebrates, croaking, and fighting predators by wielding lethal bufotoxins.

Toads may be disappearing from their former haunts, and officials are scrambling to piece together this who-did-it. What role does the rival invasive bullfrog play in this disappearance? How are climate change, roads, and habitat loss and fragmentation "muddying" the literal and figurative waters?

If you would like to help solve this slimy wildlife mystery, please consider sharing toad observations with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) through our citizen science reporting tool ([iNaturalist Oregon Wildlife Conservation Project](#)). Include a photo and location so your intel can be verified.

Jade Keehn is a wildlife conservation biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife working to restore habitat for Species of Greatest Conservation Need ("Strategy Species" in [Oregon's Conservation Strategy](#)) in Southwestern Oregon.

RRWC PROJECT UPDATE

South Fork Little Butte River Miles 6.8 and 7.6 Project

This area of South Fork Little Butte Creek is a critical link in the Upper Rogue Coho Salmon Strategic Action Plan, of which RRWC is a partner. This project aims to improve stream processes, water quality, native plant communities, and fish and wildlife habitat by implementing large wood placement, noxious weed control, and livestock exclusion fencing. The project covers 0.8 miles of creek and 14.5 acres of floodplain forest and involves three property owners.



Surveying on South Fork Little Butte Creek

Earlier this year, we began moving the project forward with initial noxious weed control, cutting non-native blackberry on almost ten acres. All of the necessary cultural resources inventories were completed, with a final report submitted to all stakeholders. An engineer-grade survey for the large wood placement has been finalized, with all of the design plans in place ready for construction this summer. Contractors involved in this project include R. Franco Restoration, Black Dog Archaeology, River Design Group, and M&M Services.



Photo by S. Wray, ODFW

The western toad (pictured) can be distinguished from the similar-sized invasive bullfrog by the presence of warty skin and a (sometimes faint) dorsal stripe

Support Our Work!

Make a Donation

All donations are greatly appreciated, put to good use, and are tax-deductible. Donate online at <http://www.rogueiverwc.org/get-involved/donate/>.

Bottle Drop Redemption

Open a Bottle Drop account at an Oregon Redemption Center, drop off your cans and bottles, then transfer your donation to RRWC [online](#).

Fred Meyers Rewards

Help RRWC earn donations by shopping with your Fred Meyer Rewards Card. Link your card to us at <https://www.fredmeyer.com/topic/community-rewards-4>. Search for us by name.

AmazonSmile

Online shoppers can go to [smile.amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), click on your account and select RRWC as your charity of choice at no cost to you.

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