RIPPLES IN THE GRANDE RONDE



RIVERS UNITING NEIGHBORS • QUARTERLY NEWS FROM THE GRANDE RONDE MODEL WATERSHED

very summer, stream flows in the Grande Ronde River Basin drop or even dry up during the hottest months of the year. Such conditions can be lethal for native fish species that use these streams for spawning, rearing, and migration. Rivers that once were used by thousands of Chinook and steelhead – now listed as threatened species under the Endangered Species Act – no longer have adequate aquatic habitat. How did this happen?

In many cases, the lack of habitat to support these populations is a result of demand for water outpacing natural supply. When early settlers began to farm and mine in the American West, the arid climate required a new framework for allocating water. The settlers instituted a system of prior appropriation, or "first in Til the Well Dry

By Meg Belais
The Freshwater Trust

Flow Restoration in the Grande Ronde Basin

time, first in right," to govern the diversion of water from creeks and rivers for out-of-stream

shortage, the older water rights receive their full allocation, while diversions for newer water rights are shut off. Fast-forward two centuries to today, when thousands of appropriations and numerous layers of water law have resulted in a system in which many of our streams and rivers are overappropriated. meaning that more water is earmarked for use than what naturally flows

uses. In times of

in the stream.

This imbalance of water supply and demand may worsen in the future. Long-term climate predictions indicate that more precipitation will fall as rain instead of as snow in the decades to come, impacting the timing of runoff and reducing summertime flows even more. Because native salmonids need cool, clean water for all stages of their life cycles, late-summer water flows are critical to their survival. As water becomes scarce, stream temperatures increase and oxygen levels and overall water quality decrease. In addition, less of the streambed is available as usable fish habitat. Meanwhile, irrigation water demand is highest in the late summer as the hot, dry weather stresses crops and leeches the soil of its moisture content. Without innovative tools to improve water management strategies and incentivize conservation, there simply will not be enough water for both fish and farms to thrive.

hese are difficult challenges to overcome if we want to protect rural economies and recover our native fish populations,

Above: A stretch of Catherine Creek in August of 2010 offers almost no water for fish, irrigators, and livestock to use. This problem threatens to get worse as more precipitation falls as rain rather than snow. Last year, The Freshwater Trust had leased enough unused water to ensure that flow remained in Catherine Creek throughout the summer. (Photo: GRMW)

Continued on page 2, FLOW

but they are not insurmountable if we work together. A coalition of individuals, organizations, government agencies, and tribes in the Grande Ronde River Basin are coordinating efforts to improve stream habitat and restore natural ecosystems while keeping working lands working and improving agricultural resilience. Part of these efforts is flow restoration, which is a voluntary approach to increasing streamflow during critical periods for salmon and steelhead.

One group working to restore flows in the Grande Ronde River Basin is The Freshwater Trust, a nonprofit organization, that uses market-based incentives to encourage water users to divert less water from streams and rivers. The Freshwater Trust finds win-win solutions that keep agricultural producers whole while providing more flow during summer months to support the survival and recovery of native salmon and steelhead. Every farm or ranch operation is different, so each potential opportunity to enhance in-stream flows calls for a tailored approach. Flow restoration can be accomplished

The most commonly used water conservation option is an in-stream lease through the Oregon Water Resources Department. In an in-stream lease, a water right holder voluntarily leases all or a portion of the right for up to five years. During the term of the lease, the beneficial use is temporarily changed from irrigation use to in-stream use, and the water right is protected from forfeiture (under Western water law, water right holders must "use it or lose it" at least once every five years, or the water right may be subject to cancellation). While many leases are in effect for the entire irrigation season, split-season leases allow farmers to use their water for irrigation during early summer when stream flow is higher. During the later summer months, when stream levels fall to their lowest points and crops face increased stress, the water right is leased in-stream to improve conditions for fish and other aquatic species.

strategies that are customized for each

landowner.

Another flow restoration tool is a conserved water project, which provides incentives for irrigation infrastructure upgrades. Under Oregon law, the water saved from irrigation

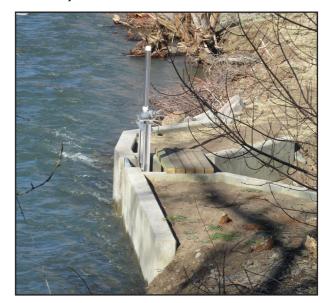
> efficiency upgrades, such as piping leaky ditches and transitioning from flood irrigation to sprinkler systems, can be spread to new acres as long as at least 25 percent of the water savings are dedicated to in-stream use. This avenue presents an opportunity for a farmer to maintain or improve productivity while creating significant in-stream benefits for fish. In cooperation with other restoration partners in the Grande Ronde River Basin, The Freshwater Trust hopes to assess conserved water

opportunities in Catherine Creek during the coming months to help identify and prioritize potential future projects.

The Grande Ronde River Basin contains some of the best potential habitat for Chinook and steelhead in the entire Columbia River



Above: The newly piped water delivery system. Before, irrigation water was distributed via an open ditch. Below: The new water intake for the irrigation system, which serves four landowners. (Photos: **USWCD**)



Basin. Because of the importance of this region for salmon recovery efforts, water right holders may be eligible for compensation to implement flow restoration projects. Funding for these water agreements is provided by the Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program, paid for by the Bonneville Power Administration in cooperation with the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. By improving flow conditions and restoring habitat in priority streams, the Bonneville Power Administration reduces the impact of its Columbia River hydropower system on migrating salmon and steelhead.

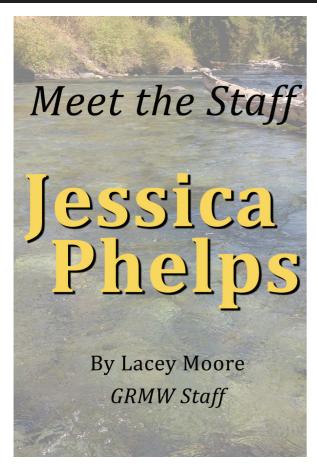
In addition to offering compensation to landowners who complete flow restoration projects, the Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program provides funding for flow restoration staff. The Freshwater Trust



Above: An example of one of the pivots that was installed as part of the irrigation upgrades on the CC-44 Restoration project on **Catherine Creek. (Photo: GRMW)**

using a variety of tools, including in-stream leasing, modified land management, water conservation, forbearance agreements, source switches, and point-of-diversion changes. These tools also can be used in combination with one another, creating water conservation





Oregon native Jessica Phelps has spent her fair share of time in the great outdoors; in fact, for two years, she lived off the grid in the Opal Creek Wilderness. The Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center is an environmental education facility located in the Opal Creek Wilderness, which is part of the Willamette National Forest. The facility is a repurposed mining camp that was established in the early 1900s, and many of the buildings are more than 100 years old. Located three miles behind a locked gate, Opal Creek is without cell phone service and depends on propane, hydropower, and solar power to operate. This remote living environment, far away from conventional infrastructure and medical resources, gave Jessica a deep connection to the area while strengthening her leadership skills.

Jessica's educational, professional, and personal connections have taken her throughout the Willamette Valley, central Oregon, and the Columbia Gorge. As a graduate student, Jessica spent time in the North Fork John Day River monitoring

restoration projects and gained a profound appreciation for eastern Oregon. As the new Restoration Outreach Coordinator for the Grande Ronde Model Watershed and The Freshwater Trust, Jessica is most excited about working with landowners and community partners, and using those connections to gain familiarity with the landscape.

Born and raised in Eugene, it's perhaps no surprise that Jessica attended the University of Oregon to earn both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in Environmental Geography. Still, Jessica said that her Duck fandom "runs in the family." Her father has taught at the University of Oregon for more than 30 years, and she's been cheering for Ducks football in Autzen Stadium from the same seats for her entire life. Jessica remembers road-tripping in the family van to the 1995 Rose Bowl: "They lost to Penn State, but it was still fun." She and her family also regularly attend track meets at the historic Hayward Field.

During the past year, Jessica has been getting her hands dirty on a working farm in Sublimity, Oregon, expanding her knowledge

of production agriculture. When she is not on the clock, you may find Jessica on the water. Jessica sheepishly admits to owning four canoes with her boyfriend. The pair are just finishing construction of a whitewater dory that they hope to put to use later this year on the Snake and Salmon Rivers. She and her boyfriend have two dogs that keep them quite busy and provide company for Jessica on her regular trail runs. Jessica said her favorite new hobby is fly fishing, a pastime that will keep her well-occupied when she moves to her new post in La Grande.

As the Restoration Outreach Coordinator, Jessica's role will be to connect with landowners and the general public throughout the Grande Ronde River Basin, spreading awareness about the personal benefits of flow restoration, water leasing, and habitat restoration. Jessica also will be integral in completing the upcoming Irrigation Efficiency Feasibility Study on Catherine Creek. Jessica's approachable personality and experience with building partnerships with people in a variety of natural resource settings make her a great fit to shoulder this responsibility. We wish her the best of luck in the coming year.



Above: Jessica Phelps, Restoration Outreach Coordinator for The Freshwater Trust and Grande Ronde Model Watershed, will start work this June. (Photo: Jessica Phelps)



Answering Thorny Questions about Restoration & Grazing

By Rachel White USFS Pacific Northwest Research Station

An Update on the Meadow Creek Project

he buzz about the Meadow Creek restoration project is not only from native bees visiting the site's flowering riparian vegetation. Now in its fifth year, this project also has generated interest from land managers and state and local agencies. It began in 2012 as an effort to restore habitat on Meadow Creek in the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Starkey Experimental Forest and Range in northeastern Oregon, with support from Bonneville Power Administration funds secured through the Grande Ronde Model Watershed.

Meadow Creek is the largest stream running through Starkey and provides important summer habitat for juvenile steelhead and Chinook salmon. The project was designed to enhance fish habitat in the stream that had declined over the years. "There is a legacy of land use at Meadow Creek that is very representative of the kinds of things people did in this region for the last century," said USFS wildlife biologist Mary Rowland. "For example, past logging practices were taking out the big trees that would have eventually contributed wood to the stream and provided fish habitat."

Habitat enhancement work is improving stream conditions for steelhead and Chinook salmon by putting more fish cover in the stream, increasing habitat complexity, and making more deep pools. Field crews began by removing two long-abandoned culverts and placing more than 60 clusters of woody debris

along the banks and in the stream. Clusters included 70-foot-long trees with giant root wads as well as 75 large boulders provided by the Oregon Department of Transportation.

In conjunction with the in-stream work, crews seeded disturbed areas with native forbs and grasses. During the spring of 2013 and the following spring, they planted by hand more than 40,000 native hardwood, conifer tree, and shrub seedlings and cuttings, which were locally grown and sourced, to jump-start riparian vegetation recovery along seven miles of the stream.

Adding to the intrigue of the Meadow Creek project is the innovative science involved. Piggybacking on the habitat enhancement activities, Mary Rowland and Mike Wisdom (also a USFS wildlife biologist), working with Tim DelCurto and Bryan Endress of Oregon State University's (OSU) Department of Animal and Rangeland Sciences, overlaid an experimental study design that has allowed researchers to begin addressing a range of questions about the effects and effectiveness of these restoration treatments.

This project provides an opportunity to conduct the first-ever study to evaluate riparian vegetation recovery for endangered salmon and steelhead habitat under varying levels of cattle, elk, and mule deer grazing. New pasture fences as well as nine exclosures, each one hectare in size, were built. A new deferred rotation grazing system for cows will begin in 2016. Researchers will use this

system to help distinguish the effects of cattle versus deer and elk browsing on planted seedlings as well as to examine how fish and fish habitat respond.

Measurable Impacts on Shrubs

Josh Averett is a faculty research assistant with OSU. He and Endress are leading research on the effects of herbivory on riparian vegetation recovery. "Starting in 2013, we began collecting data," said Averett. "We are looking to see how shrub responses change over time. Since there are no cows yet, right now we are looking at effects of deer and elk browsing."

Averett pointed out that cattle exclusion is a standard practice in restoration, with mixed outcomes. It's difficult to ascertain whether poor results are due to environmental stresses like drought, bad timing of planting, wild ungulate herbivory, or even small mammal herbivory.

Endress and Averett's team of OSU scientists will help fill that knowledge gap by teasing out the effects of four levels of ungulate herbivory on restoration efforts: elk and deer, cattle only, all ungulates, and no grazing. They already are seeing interesting results. "Over two growing seasons with deer and elk herbivory, we're seeing that wild ungulates are having measurable impacts on the restoration plantings," Averett said. "The survival rate of shrubs was suppressed about 30 percent by the deer and elk. Elk and deer also suppressed the growth of the restoration plantings. The protected plantings grew four times more than unprotected plantings."

This finding highlights the challenge of restoring stream habitat when some of the most desirable and appropriate native riparian vegetation, like willows and cottonwood, also is highly preferred forage for deer and elk.

What are Native Bees Eating?

Management questions about riparian restoration are complicated. These are

ecologically complex systems with high biodiversity. That's why the Meadow Creek project is designed to evaluate the impacts of stream restoration and grazing on a diverse spectrum of riparian responses, including the role of native bees.

The work of invertebrate ecologist Sandy DeBano at OSU aligns perfectly with the Meadow Creek project's experimental design of measuring the effects of wild ungulate herbivory compared to cattle and to no herbivory.

"Elk, deer, and cows eat different plants, some of which have flowers that native bees depend upon," said DeBano. "Not much research has been done on these native pollinators in riparian areas. Our most basic question is how diverse is this community? What kind of bees are there? What plants are they using?"

The team has identified 143 bee species in the Meadow Creek area so far. DeBano's team has two years of data on which bees are visiting what species of flower and when. DeBano, Rowland, and their students just completed a paper that synthesizes scientific literature on what types of flowering plants deer, elk, and cattle eat as well as the flowers preferred by native bees to identify the overlap between the two types of flowers.

"The types of bees visiting the areas change a lot spatially and temporally," said DeBano. "Our results will address that variability in space and time, and what that means in terms of what the herbivores are eating."

Fish Responses to In-stream Restoration, Plantings, and Grazing

Ted Sedell is the Grande Ronde River Basin steelhead and habitat monitoring project leader with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. He said snorkel surveying for fish is not as fun as it sounds in mid-summer when Meadow Creek is only three inches deep.

Snorkel surveys are one of the methods he and his team use for monitoring juvenile steelhead abundance and density levels at 12 study sites along Meadow Creek that represent either different types of restoration treatment or control sites that are un-restored. "For three consecutive months, July through September, we are collecting data on fish species and how they are using the stream habitat," said Sedell. "We also are looking at how the stream channel is changing with the restoration treatments, using a fish-centric methodology. We want to see the physical response of all that wood added to the stream."

The large woody debris that was added to Meadow Creek in 2012 and 2013 already has had some effect. "Between 2013 and 2014, there was a 10 percent increase in pool habitat and a 10 percent decrease in riffle habitat compared to reference sites," said Sedell. Most of the juvenile steelhead are found in pool habitat, and the increase in the amount of pools appears to be associated with an increase in fish.

Continued on page 8, RESTORATION & GRAZING

PROJECT UPDATE

The newly constructed channel on the third phase of the Catherine Creek "Rivermile 44" Restoration Project has been activated! The left side of these photos show the old mainstem Catherine Creek, which had been pushed against the valley wall and straightened many years ago (see pre-project photo above). The new channel (pictured below) was partially activated on June 1 and provides plenty of new fish habitat and groundwater recharge opportunities. This phase of the more than three-mile-long channel restoration project takes place on the Southern Cross Ranch, which is now owned by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. (Photos: GRMW)



Going with the Flow

By Sarah Brandy

United States
Forest Service

Dam Removal & Habitat Restoration on Five Points Creek

After nearly 100 years of impeding fish passage, a relic channel-spanning dam was removed in September 2015 from lower Five Points Creek, a tributary to the Grande Ronde River. This removal restored access to 22 miles of critical habitat to Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed summer steelhead, bull trout, and spring/summer Chinook. In addition, the first phase of restoration work occurred on 0.5 miles of Five Points Creek to improve fish habitat and riparian conditions. Six more miles of restoration work will be implemented this summer. Five Points Creek was identified as a priority area for restoration through the process that the Grande Ronde Model Watershed uses to evaluate fish habitat in the upper Grande Ronde River Basin.

Five Points Creek is included in recovery plans for upper Grande Ronde River spring Chinook and Snake River Basin summer steelhead and in the Mid-Columbia Recovery Unit Implementation Plan for Bull Trout. Like many areas in the upper Grande Ronde River watershed, Five Points Creek has a long history of past land management practices that contributed to reductions in critical habitat for ESA-listed fish.

The dam on Five Points Creek was constructed in the early 1900s as a railroad diversion to provide water for steam locomotives. Water was piped out of Five Points Creek and down to the railroad siding in Hilgard. Railroad grade was constructed along Five Points Creek to support logging activities. This railroad grade confined the stream, contributed to bank erosion, and affected channel connection to the floodplain, channel complexity, and fish habitat.

Timber harvest activities also were supported by a large logging camp operation on the creek in the early 1900s. This era of timber harvest depleted stream-side conifer abundance and reduced streambank stability, shade, and large wood recruitment into streams. In addition, splash dams used to move harvested trees down the creek had major direct impacts on the channel, eliminating wood (and all obstacles) from the channel and banks and simplifying the channel. Past livestock grazing practices also affected stream channel and riparian vegetation.

In September, the 26.5-foot-long, 3.5-foot-tall channel-spanning dam

on lower Five Points Creek was dismantled with a concrete saw and excavator, breaking this fish passage barrier into pieces and restoring connection and flow. The collection box on the river was left in place to preserve the cultural and heritage significance of the historic railroad. Planning for projects like this includes rigorous, time-consuming surveys and clearance by certified archaeologists. Implementation, however, took approximately 4.5 hours. Despite the obvious and immediate benefit of removal of this impediment to fish movement, poor habitat conditions on Five Points Creek resulting from past land management practices needed to be addressed.

Recent habitat surveys conducted by the U.S. Forest Service on Five Points Creek revealed that the channel had only 10 pieces of large wood per mile, half of the amount of wood that is considered the minimum for functioning channels. Five Points Creek also had a very low number of pools and a high width-to-depth ratio. In addition, stream temperature monitoring revealed that summer temperatures over 70 degrees were typical in Five Points Creek, creating inhospitable conditions for fish.

Work completed in 2015 on Five Points Creek was coordinated with landowner Howard Cantrell, whose farm is adjacent to the creek. Cantrell's property has statewide recognition as a "Century Farm," an honor for farmers and ranchers who have worked the same land for at least 100 years. His property has been in his family since 1871, six generations deep. Cantrell has fond memories of swimming in the hole created by the railroad diversion dam as a kid as well as of a time when Five Points Creek was abundant with salmon and steelhead. He remembers when beavers used to be prevalent throughout the creek.

"I'm glad for the restoration work," said Cantrell. "Anyone who has an opportunity for them (the U.S. Forest Service) should do it around their property....It just helps nature." Bank erosion from the dam had become a concern for Cantrell, and although he was not sure about the



Above: Trees with rootwads are used for large wood structures, providing valuable habitat for salmonids. (Photo: USFS)





Above: Before the removal of the dam, built in the early 1900s. Below: After removal, providing passage to an additional 22 miles of valuable habitat. (Photos: USFS)



idea of dam removal at project conception, he understood the benefit and believes that the threat of continued bank erosion on his property will be eliminated.

U.S. Forest Service Aquatic Restoration Biologist Joe Platz has led the Five Points Creek restoration project effort. "One of the most challenging parts of the Five Points project was acquiring wood for the 6.5 miles of in-channel restoration," said Platz. This endeavor took more than a month, and the majority of harvest occurred within the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) right-of-way along Interstate 84, where approximately 1,000 trees considered "hazard trees" by ODOT were pushed over with an excavator in order to keep the root wad intact, loaded into logging trucks, and hauled to staging areas for 2015-2016 restoration work.

Staging wood for the in-stream restoration work also involved flying approximately 715 trees to 41 staging sites along Five Points Creek between the diversion and Camp 1. "This was the biggest helicopter wood transport for restoration work that the La Grande Ranger District has completed," said Platz. Two helicopters were used: the Chinook

for the largest pieces or loads of wood weighing up to 20,000 pounds, and the Vertol for pieces or loads up to 10,000 pounds. Trees first were hauled from the interstate to two landings to minimize flight distance to the creek. Flight distance was approximately 1.5 miles to stockpile sites along Five Points Creek. Wood staged in these areas will be constructed into habitat-forming log jam structures with an excavator this summer.

In addition to dam removal and in-stream channel work on Five Points Creek, more than a half mile of stream was planted with 3,500 cuttings and native grass/forb seed in 2015 to help establish vegetation and recover riparian areas. Another 58,000 seedlings and cuttings will be planted along the six miles of creek in 2016. Future restoration work also includes constructing livestock exclosure fence on one mile of stream, rehabilitating 2.25 miles of ATV trails that are causing erosion and sedimentation in stream channels, and seeding all areas disturbed by project activities.

The Five Points Creek restoration project that began in 2015, along with other land management improvements made since the early 1990s, will address limiting factors identified in recovery plans for ESA-listed species, including a lack of habitat diversity and quality, locally degraded habitat conditions, elevated summer stream temperatures, and excess fine sediment. Improved habitat in this high-priority area in the upper Grande Ronde River will improve habitat conditions and aid in the recovery of ESA-listed species.

Post-restoration habitat surveys will be completed one and five years after in-stream restoration work. These surveys will provide

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Grande Ronde Model Watershed UPCOMING BOARD MEETINGS

Tuesday, August 23, 2016 at 5:30pm

Alpine Meadows Golf Course

66098 Golf Course Road
Enterprise, OR 97828

Tuesday, October 25, 2016 at 5:00pm

Elgin Community Center 260 North 10th Street Elgin, OR 97827

The public is welcome to attend.

Meeting dates are subject to change, please call (541) 663 - 0570 to confirm. Thank you!



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information on habitat responses to in-stream work and establishment of riparian plantings. Additionally, Five Points Creek is a steelhead index stream for Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Every spring, crews spend two weeks counting redds. This future monitoring will help biologists and managers assess the outcome of restoration work on Five Points Creek.

ccomplishments in Five Points Creek would not have been possible without the collaboration and support of the following partners: U.S. Forest Service La Grande Ranger District, Grande Ronde Model Watershed, Oregon Department of Transportation, Bonneville Power Administration, Howard Cantrell, Union Pacific Railroad, Iron Triangle, and Columbia Helicopters.

...continued from page 5, **RESTORATION**& GRAZING

"Comparing 2013 and 2014 data, juvenile steelhead numbers are up across the board," said Sedell. "In all three summer months, at the 12 study sites on Meadow Creek, there was a 200 percent increase in their abundance."

Temperature is a limiting factor for many salmonids, and there is a sense of urgency to address water temperature issues given the projected effects of climate change. "The unusually hot summer of 2015 was a warning," said Sedell. "The high temperatures were unprecedented and were starting earlier. The temperatures we would normally see in August were happening in June." Fortunately, a graduate student from Utah State University is studying this very problem with stream temperature sensors and weather stations deployed throughout Meadow Creek. The student also will develop models that predict how the shade created by the restoration plantings may mitigate the impacts on fish of increasing air temperatures.

The Meadow Creek study will continue to provide needed information about how restoration can help fish conservation efforts, particularly in the years to come as the streamside vegetation has a chance to grow and provide shade. This unique project, with its large number of interested collaborators and ideal natural laboratory setting, is unusually well-positioned to address complex questions about both riparian and terrestrial systems.

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currently has two flow restoration project managers based in northeastern Oregon. Tony Malmberg and Aaron Maxwell work with a broad coalition of partners to restore flow in the Grande Ronde Basin. Before moving to Union, Oregon, Tony spent many years ranching in Wyoming and now is a leader in the holistic grazing movement as well as the co-founder of The Savory Institute and a Board member for Grasslands, LLC. Tony has deep firsthand knowledge of how the agricultural and conservation communities rely on one another; neither community will be successful in the long-term without the support and cooperation of the other. Aaron, a fisheries biologist based in Joseph, Oregon, is an avid outdoorsman with a background in river restoration and organic ranching. He worked for the Deschutes River Conservancy and River Design Group before coming to The Freshwater Trust and brings extensive scientific understanding of the biological world to his in-stream flow work. He also serves as vice president of the Board of Directors for Fishtrap, an annual Western writers' gathering at Wallowa Lake.

ater this spring, a Restoration Outreach Coordinator will begin working in La Grande as part of a joint initiative between The Freshwater Trust and the Grande Ronde Model Watershed. This new team member, Jessica Phelps (learn more about Jessica on page 3 of this issue), will help to coordinate flow and habitat restoration efforts throughout the Grande Ronde River Basin. Collaborative partnerships like this one are increasingly critical in balancing water needs in the Grande Ronde River Basin. The Freshwater Trust and the Grande Ronde Model Watershed believe that healthy farms and healthy rivers can coexist, and we look forward to growing our team to help preserve working landscapes, flowing rivers, and the vibrant community of species they both support. ■



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