The Benefits of Watershed Restoration for Local Ecosystems & Economies

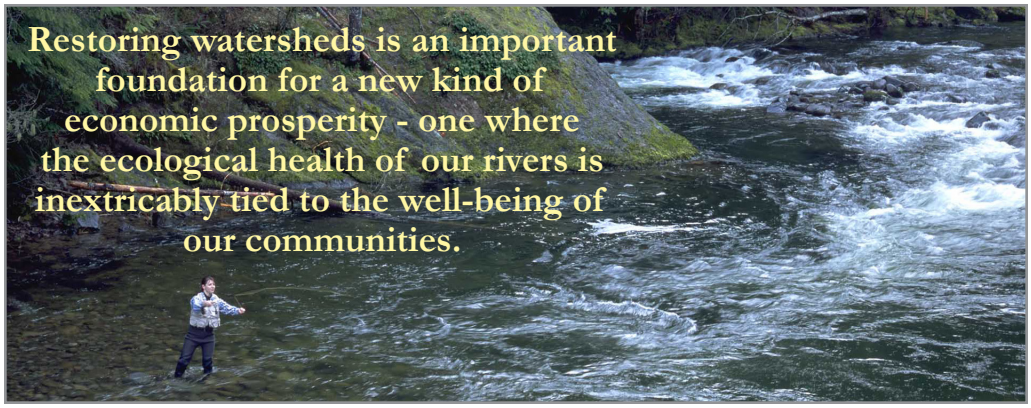
Watersheds throughout the Pacific Northwest are under intense pressure from development and land-use practices. Healthy ecosystems are essential for salmon recovery, and restoring the landscape is a priority for many communities. Watershed restoration supports clean water, clean air, and diverse habitats for fish and wildlife, but restoration projects also support economic development and job creation.

An Ecotrust study of Oregon demonstrates that restoration expenditures between 2001 and 2010 generated $978 million in economic activity and as many as 6,483 jobs.[2] Dollars invested in watershed restoration travel through the economy in several ways:

Construction underway at the Fisher Slough Marsh Restoration Project. Photo courtesy The Nature Conservancy

- Restoration project managers hire consultants, contractors, and employees to design, implement, and maintain projects;
- Consultants and contractors hire field crews, rent or purchase equipment, and buy goods and services; and
- Employees spend wages on goods and services to support their livelihoods in their own community.[3]

In Washington State, for example, the Fisher Slough Marsh Restoration Project created over 50 local jobs. Using American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding, NOAA worked with The Nature Conservancy and Interwest Construction to restore 60 acres of marsh and 15 miles of stream habitat. Both jobs and ecosystems benefit from these investments. Research has shown that an average of 17 jobs were created for every $1 million invested in restoration projects from the Recovery Act.[4] In Fisher Slough, restoration investments translated into steady employment and an additional 16,000 juvenile Chinook migrating each spring through Fisher Slough to the Skagit River and into Puget Sound.



A watershed restoration economy is emerging across the Pacific Northwest. Recent studies illustrate that 15-33 jobs are created for every $1 million spent on ecosystem restoration activities.[1]

Work crew at Fisher Slough Marsh Restoration Project. Photo courtesy The Nature Conservancy

"This job has kept my family in employment for two years, and it'll be three when it's done. I've had up to 20 employees work the job throughout- a minimum of four but a max of 20, plus all our subs. So you're looking at 50+ guys just on my end that have had employment for the last couple years out of this job. It's a pretty big impact in the community. Ninety percent of us live within 10 miles of the job, and we've lived here all our lives. It's kind of fun to work close to home and to be able to do something to help the community and the fish."

- Craig Holmgren, Project Superintendent, Fisher Slough Marsh Restoration Project

"Over the last 10 years restoration projects have allowed us to provide a sustainable living for our employees. We have grown from just a couple of employees to as many as 20. Many of them come from the natural resource industry and they can use their skills in construction and feel good about what they are doing. Without this funding we would not be able to provide these opportunities and support the local economies where we work."

- Mike Herrick, owner of Aquatic Contracting, on the Salmon River Aquatic Habitat Restoration Project

For more information

NOAA Restoration Center:
www.habitat.noaa.gov/restoration

Ecotrust: www.ecotrust.org/wwri/

University of Oregon
Ecosystem Workforce Program:
http://ewp.uoregon.edu/

Side channel excavation in the Salmon River, just prior to re-activating surface flow. Photo courtesy The Freshwater Trust

In Oregon, a partnership between NOAA and The Freshwater Trust is restoring side channel habitat and providing jobs. The Freshwater Trust contracted with Aquatic Contracting on the Salmon River Aquatic Habitat Restoration Project, creating 20 jobs and contributing to the recovery of threatened salmon and steelhead species. Partners are restoring two miles of side channel habitat and constructing large wood jams to protect Chinook salmon, coho salmon, and steelhead, each listed under the Endangered Species Act. Salmon and steelhead depend on side channels for cool, clean water and complex habitat for refuge. Restoration efforts, like the Salmon River project, provide biological benefits and support the recovery of these listed species.

Restoring watersheds is an important foundation for a new kind of economic prosperity - one where the ecological health of our rivers is inextricably tied to the well-being of our communities.

Spring Chinook spawning and digging redds (nests) in newly restored side channel habitiat on the Salmon River. Photo courtesy The Freshwater Trust.

1. Edwards, P.E.T. et. al. 2012. Investing in Nature: Restoring Coastal Habitat, Blue Infrastructure, and Green Job Creation. Marine Policy. Available online (with appropriate subscription or payment) at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2012.05.020.

Nielsen-Pincus, M. and C. Moseley. 2010. "Economic and Employment Impacts of Forest and Watershed Restoration in Oregon." University of Oregon: Ecosystem Workforce Program, Working Paper Number 24. Available online at: http://ewp.uoregon.edu/sites/ewp.uoregon.edu/files/downloads/WP24.pdf.

2. Ecotrust. 2012. Oregon's Restoration Economy: Investing in Natural Assets for the Benefit of Communities and Salmon. Portland, OR: Ecotrust. Available online at: http://www.ecotrust.org/wwri/downloads/WWRI_OR_brochure.pdf.

3. Nielsen-Pincus and Moseley, "Economic and Employment Impacts of Forest and Watershed Restoration in Oregon," 2010.

4. Edwards et. al., Investing in Nature: Restoring Coastal Habitat, Blue Infrastructure, and Green, Job Creation, 2012.

ecotrust