

The Clackamas River basin benefits from stewardship of the forests

The Forest Service and environmental advocates earn kudos for teamwork

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After years of courtroom fights over logging in the Clackamas River basin, environmental watchdogs and the U.S. Forest Service have learned to work together.

The result is Clackamas Stewardship Partners, an award-winning program that uses proceeds from timber-thinning projects to improve fish and wildlife habitat, create healthier forests and restore damage from off-road vehicles.

"There were tree-sits, there were lawsuits, there were protests," said Erik Fernandez, wilderness coordinator with Oregon Wild, one of several environmental groups that participate. "It's amazing," he said. "You stop logging the old growth, and the lawsuits and the protests seem to disappear."

Congress authorized stewardship contracts in 2002 as a way of trading small-log federal timber for environmental improvements.

Clackamas Stewardship Partners formed in 2004, bringing a wide range of organizations into discussions of forest management in the Clackamas River watershed. The partners meet once a month to review thinning proposals, identify restoration needs and recommend projects, such as restoring fish passage, decommissioning unused roads, improving campsites, thinning plantations and ensuring clean drinking water.

"Before, almost every (timber) sale was being appealed or litigated," said Jim Rice, stewardship contracting coordinator for the Mount Hood National Forest. "Since we started using stewardship contracting, we haven't been in the courts."

This year the Clackamas Stewardship Partners were recognized with the Two Chiefs' Partnership Award, given by the U.S. Forest Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, for outstanding collaborations in forest conservation.

"What used to be almost all timber sales are now being advertised as stewardship contracts," Rice said. As recently as 2005, he said, all logging in the Mount Hood National Forest was done through traditional timber contracts.

The first Mount Hood stewardship contract went to High Cascade, a Carson, Wash., plywood veneer manufacturer. The Forest Service gave the company about two years to thin 107 acres of second-growth fir, harvesting about 1 million board feet of timber and completing a series of wildlife habitat and other improvements.

The environmental jobs included killing two firs per acre by girdling, leaving the trees to become standing snags for birds and other wildlife. Two more trees per acre were felled and left on the ground, also for wildlife.

As participants starting seeing results, initial distrust dissolved and the pace of projects increased.

"When I first joined the group there was quite a bit of frustration, and people were kind of going round and round," said Lisa Moscinski, restoration coordinator with the Gifford Pinchot Task Force. "We just kind of slowly moved forward, and it keeps on getting quicker and quicker how we're able to get projects done."

The Forest Service is not bound by the recommendations of the group, but as Rice put it: "When you have a group of key stakeholders coming to you, saying they recommend (something), we'd be foolish not to consider those recommendations."