Williams Creek restoration project set for this summer

BY KEVIN SWEENEY

A small dam appears every spring on Williams Creek, half a mile upstream of its confluence with the Applegate River. The push-up dam, installed in April and removed in October, diverts water into the Lower Bridgepoint Irrigation Ditch.

Like hundreds of small dams across the Rogue River basin, it relies on an approach used in Oregon since the 19th century. While these types of dams work for farmers, they can interfere with fish migration. And there are newer, easier ways to get the job done.

This summer, the Williams Creek dam will come down and be replaced by a system that conserves water for agriculture, reduces work for irrigators, and enables fish passage. The project is led by the Applegate Partnership & Watershed Council (APWC).

When the current push-up dam is built each spring, the creek rises and meets the entrance to the irrigation ditch. At that point, some of the creek water flows into the ditch for agricultural use. This approach can restrict fish access to quality habitat and increases upstream water temperatures. It also causes problems for irrigators —water in their ditch is lost through seepage and evaporation. And building and removing the dam year after year leads to streambank erosion.

"People see a push-up dam that might only be three feet tall, and they assume salmon can get past," said Janelle Dunlevy, APWC's Executive Director. "While that may be the case with adult fish, juvenile migration is greatly restricted. And that can reduce fish stocks in later years."

Removing the dam will enhance access to dozens of miles of habitat. Williams Creek is nowhere near that long, but it splits into multiple forks, each with small tributaries containing viable habitat. Chinook and Coho salmon, lamprey, and steelhead will have better access into the creek.

With the dam removed, a roughened channel will be constructed to raise the streambed enough to let a newly installed headgate divert water for local farms. The new system can draw water at a wide range of flows. When irrigation season starts, the headgate is opened with the twist of a knob, diverting water into a new irrigation pipeline. Water flow in the stream continues uninterrupted.

The buried pipeline will replace the open ditch, reducing water loss. A headgate screen prevents fish from entering the pipeline.

The solution will save irrigators time and money. They will no longer need to install, maintain, and remove the dam each year and won't need to regularly clear out the irrigation ditch, processes that can take several days.

Key partners include Whistling Duck Farm and Blue Fox Farm, two organic farms that rely on water from the Lower Bridgepoint Irrigation Ditch.

"We knew these two farms would be great partners," said Julie Cymore, APWC Fish Passage Program Manager. "They had already taken steps to make their irrigation more efficient and invested in piping where seepage appeared to be the greatest."

"At first, I wasn't sure about this because I thought it might end up like a big irrigation project," said Chris Jagger of Blue Fox. "But when we started expressing what we wanted, it was clear that they listened. They understood we're working farmers here and took that into account. Whatever we did had to work for the farms as well as the fish."

Public funding for the project's design and implementation came from Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife (ODFW), and the US Fish & Wildlife Partners Program. Private funding came from American Rivers, Rogue Basin Partnership, and the Open Rivers Fund, a project of Resources Legacy Fund supported by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

"The Medford District BLM fisheries biologists and hydrologists have also been great partners," said Dunlevy. "They're good at what they do, and they've been very helpful."

This project builds on riparian restoration work APWC has implemented on the banks of the Applegate River and Williams Creek and on the community planning they have participated in for the Provolt Special Management Recreation Area.

Even though the dam is only three feet high, it can trap juvenile fish. Photos: APWC.

A reconstructed roughened channel near Talent that's similar to what's planned for Williams Creek.

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Changing faces of the Applegate Partnership

BY BARBARA SUMMERHAWK

The faces of the Applegate Partnership & Watershed Council (APWC) will be two-dimensional for the COVID-19 duration: Zooming board meetings, Skyping consultations over the distances, and relying on email and messaging as this new era of uncertainty brings a change in staff and in approaches to current projects.

Jakob Shockey, a solid, three-dimensional presence in the APWC's office and out in the field around the valley for seven years, is moving on to new opportunities. As of April 1, Jakob, who headed many riparian restorations during his tenure with APWC, will focus on his passion for promoting beavers on the landscape as an important process for restoring and maintaining ecosystem resiliency and water security. He is heading up The Beaver Coalition (TBC), a new non-profit organization that will work to enable humans to partner with beavers through education, science, advocacy, and process-based restoration: work which the APWC looks forward to cooperating on. "The APWC will miss Jakob's passion, energy, and dedication to riparian restoration work in the valley," said Geoff Becker, APWC Board Member.

The new face joining the APWC as our Habitat Restoration Project Manager will be Nathan Gehres, a local from Humbug Creek who has had considerable experience with field work after his graduation from Oregon State University. He has also previously worked with Oregon State University and the US Forest Service in the area. This is his second employment with the APWC. His first was as a seasonal employee at the beginning of his career path. Nathan comments that after having spent over twenty years in the field of ecology, he has "become more and more concerned by the changes I see occurring throughout the landscape, especially in my home region of the Applegate Valley, a place of rich biological diversity that is very close to my heart. I look forward to the opportunity to help maintain and restore this area in whatever way I can. I also am excited to work again with the people of the Applegate Valley, perhaps the area's greatest resource."

Other new "faces" of the APWC are the newly updated logo of the APWC and a grand, informative map of the Applegate that will be on permanent display in Cantrall Buckley Park and available in print in the future. The snappy new logo and map were designed by Gregg Payne. The map features the landscape of the Applegate Watershed with features marking historical sites, hiking trailheads, fish-bearing streams, and points of interest in the valley. We would like to thank Annette Parsons for her incredible GIS skills which provided us with the raw data to turn into the map.

The APWC fish passage and riparian restoration projects will continue, along with our educational and outreach activities, even in our time of distancing. We look forward to meeting online and developing new relationships with The Beaver Coalition, local nonprofit organizations, and community members across the watershed until and at such time meetings of like minds can take place face to face in the watershed again.

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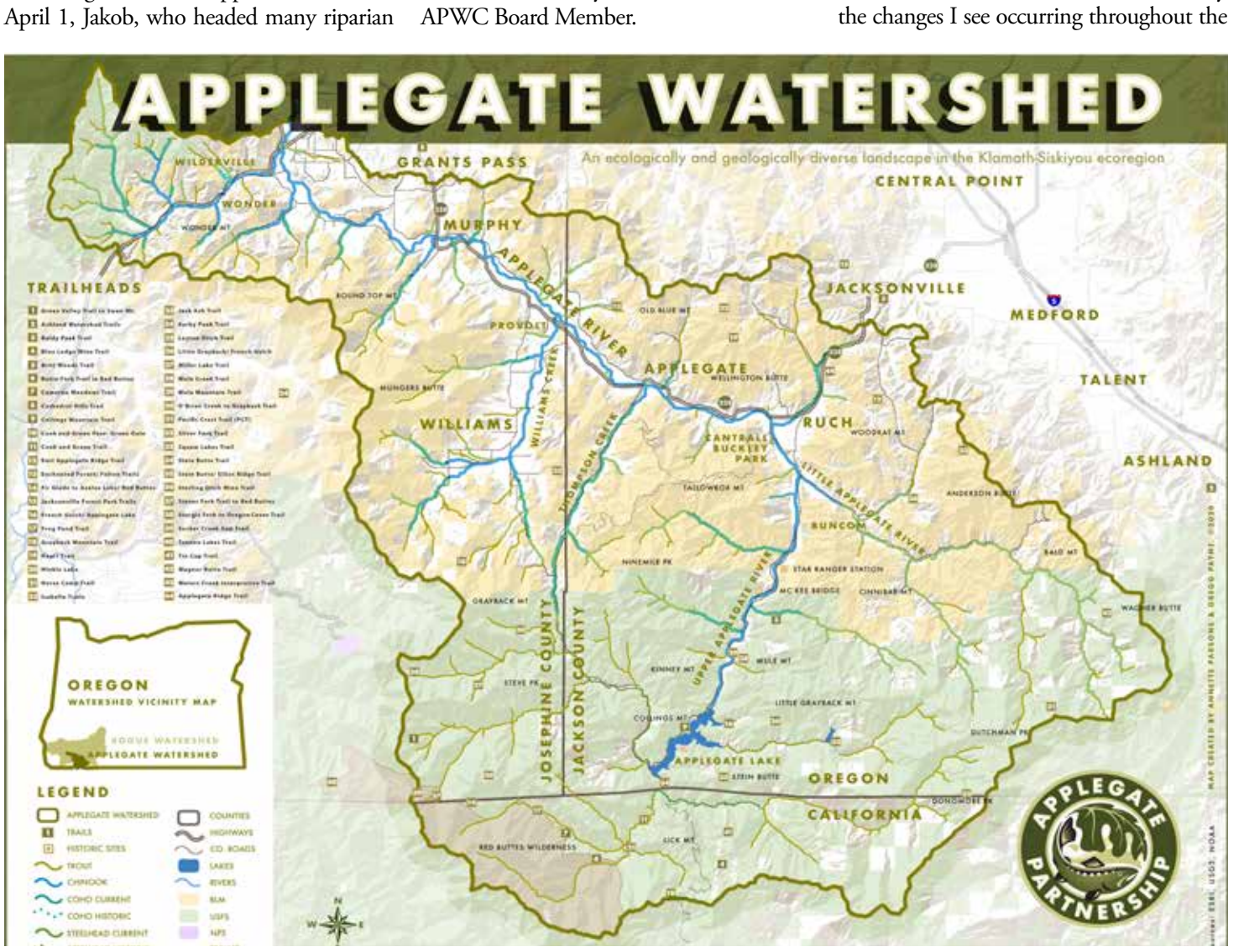

Annette Parsons' work laid the groundwork for Gregg Payne's design for a new Applegate watershed map which will be available in print.

Gregg Payne designed the new Applegate Partnership & Watershed Council logo.