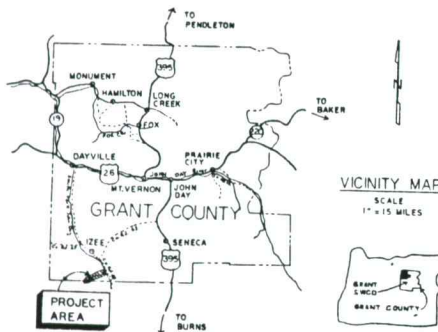


Triage in a Western Watershed The South Fork CRMP

Joseph W. Thompson and Hugh Barrett

The John Day River system of northcentral Oregon, with its 285 miles of free-flowing water, is one of the largest remaining undammed river systems in the "lower forty-eight." Known by rafters and canoeists for its long, placid glides and hot summer sun, the John Day's lower reaches are gaining national recognition for its reel-stripping smallmouth bass. More significant, however, is the river's reputation for harboring some of the few remaining native strains of the anadromous chinook salmon and wild steelhead (a sea-run rainbow trout).

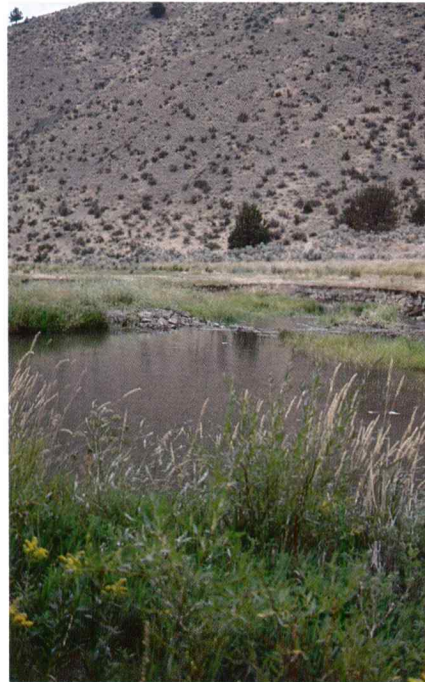


From its mountain headwaters in central Oregon to its mouth on the Columbia River, the John Day is bounded by public forest and rangelands, ranches, farms and timber company holdings. All are dependent on its flow for their particular interests and needs.

But the river is in trouble.

Each spring the river roars with snow-melt and ice that eats at the streambed, tears out chunks of productive meadows and hayfields then, in the dog days of summer, it dwindles to a whispered flow. Sediment clogs irrigations ditches, streamside vegetation loses vigor and value, and summer water temperatures soar.

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*Background-Low head check structure
Foreground-Willow recovery*

In December of 1988, private landowners in the upper South Fork of the John Day watershed asked the Grant Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to initiate a Coordinated Resource Management

Plan (CRMP) for the area. The Grant SWCD had already identified the water quality and flow distribution problems of the watershed in its Long Range Plan, so the response was positive and immediate.

The South Fork CRMP began, when a group representing seven ranches, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Soil Conservation Service, and three commercial timber companies met, at the District's invitation, to establish a common approach in the treatment of the river's ills. In its earliest meetings, this planning group recognized that the key to river health lay in the restoration of watershed function.

By creating or restoring conditions in which moisture enters the soil where it falls and percolates safely to the stream, rather than being lost to overland flow and excessive transpiration, there was a good chance of settling down the flows of the John Day. In doing so, the group foresaw a general upturn in the health, diversity, and productivity of the whole watershed and all its uses.



Upland water development.

From this vantage point, the objective of the South Fork CRMP made itself clear. The efforts of all involved would be to "flatten the hydrologic curve" of the John Day River—to reduce the high flows of late winter and spring and to extend the duration and amount of flow in late summer and fall.

To attempt a nearly 200,000-acre, watershed-wide, resource restoration campaign with limited numbers of people and tight money would have spread too thin a veneer of effort in attempting any substantive change. So, with the objective established, the next step in the process was to focus on those sub-watersheds in most immediate need of improvement. In selecting these sub-watersheds, the planning group reviewed all current schedules for timber harvest, allotment management plan revisions, and the treatments planned by private landowners. As part of this triage, or sorting, were the observations of group members about the severity and solvability of sub-watershed problems.

Though not the worst of all cases, Utley Creek rose quickly to the head of the list because of its readily treatable problems and the high level of resident interest. During the planning group's trip to Utley Creek to confirm their initial selection, many necessary improvements



CRMP group meeting—at right facilitator Joe Thompson Dist. Cons. SCS



South Fork John Day River—foreground Izee schoolhouse meeting place for CRMP group.

were obvious. Grazing management was seen as essential to improve plant vigor and diversity, to increase plant litter accumulation in the uplands, and to restore riparian vegetation and promote stream-bank integrity. To support improvements in the grazing system, fencing and water developments would be needed. Where improved grazing management alone was not considered adequate to complete the work of upland restoration, range seedings and brush management were designed. Brush management, in this case, had two goals—to return balance in plant community populations (diversity instead of dominance) and reduce soil moisture loss from excessive evapotranspiration and surface runoff.

Low rock drop structures in the stream, and seeding and hardwood plantings in the riparian zone were used to accelerate healing of the degraded stream channel and the eroding streambanks.

The South Fork CRMP is well on the way to success for a few simple reasons: 1) the decision to treat individual sub-watersheds made good use of limited resources, 2) the coordinated approach to planning made mutually acceptable decisions possible and, 3) in Oregon, CRMP had earned the trust of organizations that fund natural resource improvement. Range improvement and watershed funds



Vegetative inventory with local high school student volunteers led by Joe Thompson Dist. Cons. SCS at left.



Beaver dam on Utley Creek.

for public land improvement were available through the public land management agencies. Private landowners, with cost-share assistance from the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service and direct grants from the Governor's Watershed Enhancement Board, financed implementation of the plan on private lands.

The second phase of planning and implementation of the South Fork CRMP has begun by address-

ing the treatment needs of the Corral Creek sub-watershed and future planning areas have been identified.

Through the Coordinated Resource Management process, a long-term, focused effort to rehabilitate a large watershed containing diverse resources, uses, and ownerships is underway. The foremost accomplishment of this effort has been the increased appreciation of resource values and their

inter-connectedness gained by the many resource users in this John Day watershed.

Success in the South Fork CRMP has shown that goals as seemingly diverse as chinook salmon survival and livestock forage production share common roots. It shows, as well, that allocating resource treatment according to a well-conceived system of priorities can maximize the survivors of resource damage.