The Salt Creek Project

Last year, the MRS Board directed me to look into finding a larger scale, multi-year conservation project in which the Steelheaders would have a fairly large share of the cost and in-kind support, similar to what we did at Jones Creek between 2010 and 2015. I believe that the Salt Creek project, managed by the Rogue River Watershed Council (RRWC) fits those criteria very nicely.

The Little Butte Creek watershed, a tributary to the Rogue located flowing along Highway 140 from the south side of Mt. McLoughlin and through Eagle Point and White City, is one of just a few major producers of Coho Salmon, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in the Rogue Basin. It also contains healthy populations of fall Chinook, steelhead, and resident cutthroat trout. Several high profile restoration efforts have occurred that positively impact native fish in Little Butte Creek including removal of several dams, a 0.7-mile channel realignment on Denman Wildlife Area (Middle Rogue Steelheaders was a key funding partner on this effort), and numerous flood irrigation to sprinkler conversion projects.

Throughout the upper Rogue, the National Marine Fisheries Service Coho Recovery Plan identifies barriers to fish passage as a highly ranked stressor and dams as a highly ranked threat. Agricultural practices is a very highly ranked threat because of altered hydrologic function (irrigation diversion) and impaired water quality from reduced stream flow, reduced streamside forest conditions, and livestock use.

Salt Creek is a substantial tributary to the upper reaches of the main stem of Little Butte Creek (near the town of Lake Creek). Spring fed, Salt Creek maintains cold water temperatures throughout the summer months providing essential over summering habitat for both Coho Salmon and steelhead. Nine diversion dams block roughly 5.5 miles of high quality habitat. Seven of these nine structures are listed as high priority by ODFW as fish passage barriers in the Rogue Basin. The RRWC is engaging these four landowners/water rights holders along Salt Creek in an effort to improve fish passage and secure protected instream flows.

The RRWC recently received a grant from Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board to engage the other three water users / land owners in an effort to improve fish passage at their diversion structures, and to work with them to secure additional protected instream water transfers (or leases) to further improve over summering habitat in both Salt Creek and the upper reaches of Little Butte Creek.

In 2017, the RRWC will be:

- removing four diversion dams and completing the 1.25 cfs (560 gallons per minute) instream water transfer with the C2 Cattle Ranch;
- engaging the other three landowners, surveying diversion areas, developing fish passage improvement plans and locking in landowner agreements on a specific course of action;
- starting to raise funding and secure permits for developed projects;
- monitoring juvenile fish densities downstream and upstream of the fish passage barriers.

Out years are more difficult to predict, but the RRWC anticipates going to construction on several projects in 2018 and completing construction activities in 2019. Monitoring will continue throughout the restoration work and for several years after construction is complete.

The goal is to address fish passage at all nine of the barriers on Salt Creek so that salmon and steelhead of all sizes can pass each site without difficulty in all but the most extreme flow

conditions. Like at Jones Creek, where the Stream Restoration Alliance showed big steelhead production benefits by simply inviting spawning fish to more easily reach the upstream section of the creek, this project may produce huge results by removing the roadblocks in Salt Creek and providing more summer flow. Along the way, the outreach work related to the diversion dams will provide opportunities to enroll landowners in livestock fencing and associated livestock management techniques, conversion from "wild" flood irrigation to other irrigation practices, streamside forest restoration, and other watershed restoration techniques that will leverage the salmon and steelhead production gains through increased spawning success. When all is said and done, Salt Creek will provide a valuable, barrier free refuge for Coho Salmon and steelhead.

The RRWC asked the Middle Rogue Steelheaders for support for this project. At our January meeting, the Board of Directors voted to approve the request in the amount of $35,000 over a four-year period. It's most likely that the majority of the funding need will come in 2018 and 2019, when the bulk of the streambed re-construction will be done.

We can all be proud of the Middle Rogue Steelheaders for the response to help fund the Salt Creek project. I believe that this is one that we will feel good about for many years to come.

Doyle Nelson

C&R Coordinator