

WHAT IS WATERSHED ENHANCEMENT?

A watershed is the area drained by a stream or collection of streams such that all collected waters are discharged at a single point. Many of Oregon's rivers and streams have undergone substantial change in the last 150 years. Many changes have resulted in less water percolating into the soil and more water running off the surface. Higher flows during major precipitation and run-off events tend to scour out stream bottoms and banks. Streambed scour results in lowering the stream channel and the associated water table. Diking, drainage, channelization and other alterations to streams and wetlands in Oregon's watersheds have isolated streams from their floodplains.

Watershed enhancement is any activity which helps the watershed function better, i.e., to store water by capturing it, holding it longer, and releasing higher quality and quantities of water later into the summer season. Watershed management starts with protection of existing systems. It is important to look at management of the stream corridor (the floodplain, stream channel, and the riparian zone adjacent to it) and of the uplands (the area upslope of the stream corridor). Changes in land management practices, i.e., timber management, agricultural practices and road building for example, directly affect areas lower down in the watershed.

Often, work in the stream corridor can raise the streambed and the water table, resulting in improved fish habitat and other stream benefits. Care must be taken to ensure such efforts have long-term benefits. Other restoration efforts can focus on restoring vegetation along the stream corridor (riparian area), which may be beneficial to both land managers and fish and wildlife. Healthy riparian zones (the area next to the stream connected to the water table) are highly productive wildlife areas providing both food and habitat. Riparian area vegetation serves to stabilize stream banks and provide shade to streams – providing cooler water (beneficial to fish) and it provides habitat for insects – and important food supply for fish, birds, amphibians, reptiles and small mammals.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Watershed enhancement depends on successful long-term partnerships. Every square foot of ground in Oregon is part of a watershed. How each of us managed the land we live on or depend on affects the function of a watershed. How we manage the vegetation, the use of lands, and the disposal of waste all contributes to or detracts from a watershed.

Communities rely on healthy watersheds for the life giving water they provide and for the economic benefits derived from the quality and quantity of water they provide. Water for agriculture, domestic use, industry, and fish and wildlife is essential in order to have healthy communities. The future of your watershed, like your community, is dependent on concerned and committed people representing all local interests – and resources. A watershed council is a volunteer forum to express your interests and an opportunity to build partnerships with others in your community.

What is a watershed council?
What is watershed enhancement?
Why should I care?

WHAT IS A WATERSHED COUNCIL?

As defined by House Bill 3441: “Watershed Council” means “a **voluntary local** organization designated by a local government group convened by a county governing body to address the goal of sustaining natural resource and watershed protection and enhancement within a watershed.”

Put more simply, it is a group of people who all have an interest in the sustainable management of the natural resources and water conditions coming out of the watershed in which they live and do business.

A watershed council should have all local interests participating in order to identify the shared values they believe are important in their watershed. They look at the past and present condition of their watershed and identify what they must do in order to ensure the future condition of the watershed is what they desire for themselves and future generations. The benefit from sound watershed management transcends all ownership and political boundaries.

Local technical expertise from local, state and federal agencies can assist in learning about the watershed and opportunities to help it function better.

A watershed council, under HB 3441, must be recognized by a local government (city, county, water or sewer district). As per HB 3441, “When multiple local government groups are involved within an area that would be served by a watershed council, the affected local government groups shall together determine their respective roles and the appropriate method for appointing members to local watershed council.” Lane County has formally recognized all five watershed councils: Siuslaw, McKenzie, Coast Fork Willamette, Mid-fork Willamette, and Long Tom.