



Conservation in Washington: Powered by People



MAKING AN IMPACT:

- Working with irrigators to replace 136 non-compliant fish screens in Okanogan River.
- Developed water quality plan for Okanogan Watershed.
- Restored stretch of Bonaparte Creek to its historic channel.

OKANOGAN CONSERVATION DISTRICT - IMPROVING WATER QUALITY IN THE OKANOGAN WATERSHED

When the Okanogan Conservation District began developing a water quality plan for the Okanogan Watershed (WRIA 49) in 1995, they found many challenges. Some streams exhibited excess sediment or had been rechanneled. Water quality monitoring revealed high levels of dissolved oxygen and fecal coliform. In response, the Okanogan Conservation District launched a series of projects to protect and restore the watershed.

FINDING A COMMON PATH A diversity of stakeholders are invested in the watershed. Recognizing the success of water quality projects depends on collaboration, the Okanogan Conservation District worked hard to bridge the interests of private landowners with the goals of the Colville Tribes and several federal, state, and local government entities. The resulting watershed projects balance water quality and land use goals.

ACTION ON THE GROUND In 2000-2003 the District surveyed Bonaparte Creek and found septic pipes draining directly into the creek. The associated homes were outside Tonasket city limits, but the District proposed a deal between homeowners and the City to grandfather-in the failing wells and sewer the area. Years later, the District worked with a landowner to move a stretch of Bonaparte Creek away from Highway 20 and back to its historic stream channel. The stretch of stream increased by over 1,000 feet and has been planted with native vegetation. The District also currently offers an incentive-based program with a goal of replacing 136 non-compliant fish screens along the Okanogan River. Fish screens protect juvenile fish from water diversions, such as irrigation pump intakes. As a result of the program—which covers 100 percent of the costs to replace and install new fish screens—irrigators voluntarily have replaced 55 non-compliant screens. The District has contracted with the Colville Tribes to replace 50 more screens next year.

Okanogan Conservation District has faced some logistical hurdles. State and federal agencies rarely award grants for monitoring, so the District lacks capacity to measure impacts of installed practices. And, while landowner participation has increased over time, more outreach is needed to increase stewardship on private lands. According to District Manager Craig Nelson, the success of projects in the watershed depends on positive relationships with landowners.

“Oftentimes we get called into projects because other partners need somebody the landowner can trust,” said Nelson. “We’re governed by local volunteer supervisors, most of whom are farmers and ranchers themselves. I think other partners want us involved because, frankly, they know we’ll get through the landowner’s door before they will.”

Restoring Bonaparte Creek to its natural channel, from project beginning (left) to end (right)

