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Vernal pool restoration project honored with Land Board Award

CENTRAL POINT, Ore. – A southwest Oregon mitigation project that restored wetlands and returned abundant native species to nearly 200 acres of rare vernal pool habitat was honored today with a State Land Board Award.

“This project is a major achievement in restoring vernal pool habitat,” says Oregon Treasurer Tobias Read, who presented the award during a virtual ceremony. “Years of hard work, innovation, and collaboration resulted in an outstanding outcome for Oregon.”

Vernal pools, an unusual wetland type found in Jackson County, fill during the rainy season and dry in the summer heat. Unique plants and animals evolved to survive that cycle – including threatened species vernal pool fairy shrimp and endangered plants Cook’s desert parsley and large-flowered wooly meadowfoam.

Much Jackson County vernal pool habitat has been lost to development, incompatible land uses, or invasive weeds.

The eight-year project saw the Oregon Department of Transportation – along with key partners The Nature Conservancy and CC Patterson & Associates – testing new technology and innovative techniques to restore vernal pool wetlands and provide compensatory wetland mitigation for many key transportation projects across the region.

To locate the original pools, the team reviewed historic aerial photos and looked at lidar data, then hit the field, says consultant Cam Patterson, who developed many of the techniques used over his more than 40-year career restoring vernal pools.

“We were amazed to see how accurately the lidar imagery used with the historic aerial imagery modeled practically every cubic foot of past disturbance on that landscape,” Patterson says.
“With that, we had everything we needed to know to begin restoring the topography to pre-disturbance condition.”

“We went out to spots where vernal pools were likely and began to slowly dig, much like an archaeologist would,” says Paul Benton, ODOT Wetland Scientist. “By using this technique, we were able to uncover the old vernal pool surfaces.”

The team learned as they went, testing new techniques and ideas, and leaving room for trial and error.

“We got better each year,” says Keith Perchemlides, Field Ecologist with The Nature Conservancy in Oregon. “It was very satisfying to do a long-term restoration, and bring those lessons learned to each successive year. The project demonstrates successful methods for listed species recovery and conservation of this unique local ecosystem.”

Project collaborations grew over the years as well, with each partner contributing multiple benefits – for example, providing native species seeds to other restoration projects, hosting educational tours and field visits, and planting riparian areas.

The multi-year project also allowed ongoing monitoring – with data collected showing measurable success. The vernal pool wetlands area doubled. The vernal pool fairy shrimp population increased four-fold. The desert parsley population – nonexistent pre-restoration – numbers more than 10,000 mature flowering plants. The meadowfoam population has grown so large it’s no longer practical to count. Native plants now dominate the landscape, making up 70 percent of the plant community.

“This project exceeded expectations from every angle, setting a new standard for how habitat restoration can be done,” says Oregon Department of State Lands Director Vicki L. Walker.

The Land Board Awards honor exceptional projects for their contributions to protecting and enhancing Oregon’s treasured natural resources. The projects and partners honored consistently demonstrate how much can be achieved when Oregonians work together to help our lands and waters thrive.

Learn more about all 2020 Land Board Award winners on the [awards website](https://www.oregon.gov/ODOT/Flickr) or view the awards ceremony on the [DSL YouTube Channel](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72157711951865403).

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