

## Project Progress Report | September 2025

### Introduction

This Project Progress Report summarizes the Oregon Department of Energy's initial work for the Natural Climate Solutions Workforce Development and Training Programs Needs Study through August 31, 2025. This report fulfills a commitment from ODOE and the project team to update the legislature on project activities and progress in place of delivering a final product by September 15. The final study will be submitted to the legislature by December 31, 2025.

Through the adoption of HB 3409 in 2023, the Oregon Legislature established a state policy to implement natural climate solutions to help mitigate the future impacts of climate change. The Natural Climate Solutions Workforce Development and Training Programs Needs Study will offer data, policy, and programmatic recommendations that will support Tribes, landowners, land managers, and environmental justice communities in their efforts to seek out, engage, or create the skilled workforce they need to support natural climate solutions.

The Needs Study will identify the industries and occupations that are associated with natural climate solutions in the state. It will make progress toward illuminating gaps in the workforce, limiting factors for training or reskilling workers, and pathways to increase the quality of all occupations engaged in natural climate solutions (NCS). Investing in the NCS workforce is crucial for maximizing the mitigation and adaptation benefits of nature-based climate action, as well as delivering additional co-benefits like biodiversity protection and improved economic outcomes for workers and their communities.

The contract for this work was executed on June 25, 2025. The project team includes Estolano Advisors, ECONorthwest, and Kimímela Consulting.

### Main Tasks

Several interim deliverables will contribute toward the published final study, including a baseline workforce assessment, a needs analysis, and occupational and training program profiles that detail key occupations and programs that provide training in specialized skillsets necessary to implement natural climate solutions across land types.

Robust engagement is occurring for this project, including multiple meetings with the Oregon Climate Action Commission, the Natural & Working Lands Advisory Committee (which was convened by the Chair of the Commission), and the Inter-agency Working Group (IWG). The IWG is comprised of the natural resource agencies named in HB 3409. Interviews with employers, workers, and training program providers is taking place over the duration of the project and Kimímela Consulting is beginning dialogues with Tribal Nations and Tribal organizations to start to understand nature-based climate action workforce and training program needs.

## Project Status

The table below indicates the status of each task during the reporting period ending August 31, 2025.

**Table 1: Status of Project Tasks as of August 31, 2025**

Task	Task Title	Status
Task 1	Project Management	Ongoing
Task 2	Kick-off Meeting	Complete
Task 3	Project Approach	Complete
Task 4	Engagement with OCAC, N&WL AC, IWG, and Interviewees	In progress
Task 5	Natural Climate Solutions Occupational Profiles	In progress
Task 6	Workforce Development and Training Program Profiles	In progress
Task 7	Baseline NCS Workforce Assessment	Forthcoming
Task 8	Needs Analysis	Forthcoming
Task 9	Final Report	Forthcoming
Task 10	Technical and Summary Appendices	Forthcoming

## Completed Work

After completing the project start-up tasks, the project team has conducted significant engagement with project partners, including agencies, employers, and natural and working lands workforce leaders. Key activities that have occurred to date include:

- Conducting the project kick-off meeting
- Feedback sessions with the Commission and the Advisory Committee
- One-on-one interviews with employers, workers, workforce program developers, and key agency staff

The team has also collaborated with ODOE and its feedback partners in developing a methodology for the quantitative workforce assessment study. Draft templates for the profiles of occupations and workforce programs have been submitted, and the team is collecting feedback to refine the templates.

## Early Findings

### Complex Employment Landscape

Initial engagement with feedback groups and workforce partner interviews revealed, as expected, a range of occupations, conditions, and challenges in the NCS workforce. This work spans a wide range of land types and natural resource sectors, and involves a wide array of occupations from engineers that design wetland and floodplain restoration, to workers that plant trees and shrubs, to prescribed burn

specialists and certified herbicide applicators. Job names vary widely depending on the sector, even while the work may contain similar skillsets across jobs.

While public agencies and non-profit organizations often plan and implement many NCS activities on Oregon's natural and working lands, or aid private landowners in planning and implementation, contractors perform most on-the-ground NCS work. A mix of public and private-sector employment signifies that a range of solutions will be required to meet the diverse set of needs across employer types and sectors. For instance, while state agency program staff may plan and design NCS work, it is often the workforce contractors that conduct the work, providing most of the labor for the earth moving, herbicide spraying, and replanting during implementation.

## Workforce Challenges Noted

Working groups and interviewees have emphasized disparities in job benefits between the urbanized areas of the state and rural communities. Conservation districts in rural Oregon have difficulty with recruitment and staff retention because they cannot compete with the pay and benefits of better-funded urban districts. As a result, workers use the lower-wage rural positions as a steppingstone on their way to better paid jobs in other areas of the state. This type of career pathway can work, but state resources can provide greater opportunities for advancement that allows workers to stay in place and that could help rural districts develop and retain local talent.

Interviewees to date have also noted challenges to workforce retention such as reliable transportation, affordable housing, and lack of childcare, which disproportionately affect women and lower-income households.

## Data Limitations

Early efforts to develop NCS occupational profiles revealed mismatches between the standardized occupation and industry classifications found in state and federal sources and the job titles commonly used in the field. While less apparent in the forestry and agriculture sector, ecological jobs associated with restoration, for example, are not clearly classified. For example, the occupation 'ecologist' does not appear in the classification scheme, except under the occupation 'forester,' which suggests ecologists in other land sectors are not adequately reflected in associated datasets. The project team, in collaboration with ODOE and feedback partners, is developing a data crosswalk and occupation definitions that will provide a map for profiling conservation and ecological work. This methodology is new and the foundational information will benefit future workforce studies of NCS occupations.

## Upcoming Work

Ongoing coordination among the consultants and ODOE staff is essential to ensure that all elements of the project inform one another—especially persistent engagement with feedback groups and one-on-one interviews with workforce partners. Iterative feedback with key partners will keep the study grounded and reflective of the reality of people delivering NCS on Oregon's natural and working lands.

In the coming weeks, Estolano Advisors and Kimímela Consulting's engagement will accelerate with a diversity of partners and sectors across Oregon geographies. The insights from this outreach will inform the team as it transitions to developing a Needs Analysis. This analysis will evaluate the robustness of

the NCS workforce development landscape and identify challenges, needs, and gaps that may affect its ability to meet Oregon's climate goals.

ECONorthwest will soon finalize the methodology for occupational analysis and begin producing occupational profiles for key NCS occupations. Building on these definitions, they will lead a Baseline NCS Workforce Assessment that incorporates demographic data, which will help identify opportunities for better supporting access to quality jobs for underrepresented groups.

## Conclusion

Work on the project is progressing well. Many tasks are complete or in progress, and important collaborations are underway that will prepare the project team for success in its closing tasks. The project team and ODOE are collaborating on an ongoing basis to ensure that the study has a sound foundation and meets the goals of HB 3409.