Oregon
Tina Kotek, Governor

OREGON WATERSHED ENHANCEMENT BOARD
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MEMORANDUM

TO: Partnerships and Capacity Committee

FROM: Eric Williams, Restoration Grants Manager
Jillian McCarthy, Partnerships Coordinator
Denise Hoffert, Partnerships Coordinator
Eric Hartstein, Senior Policy Coordinator

SUBJECT: Focused Investment Partnership (FIP) Ecological Priorities Review 2025
June 3, 2025, Partnerships and Capacity Committee Meeting

I. Background

The FIP grant program provides multiple years of funding for high performing partnerships to implement landscape-scale restoration and conservation that addresses Board-identified ecological priorities of significance to the State. Oregon Administrative Rule 695-047-0030 requires the Board to approve these ecological priorities at least every five years, and that the priorities be determined with public input, scientific rigor, and include a map, theory of change, and narrative describing the desired ecological outcomes for eligible FIP initiative activities. In 2020 the Board approved, with modest revisions, the following ecological priorities that were first designated by the Board in 2015:

- Aquatic Habitat for Native Fish Species
- Closed Lakes Basin Wetland Habitat
- Coastal Estuaries
- Coho Habitat and Populations along the Coast
- Dry-Type Forest Habitat
- Oak Woodland and Prairie Habitat
- Sagebrush/Sage-Steppe Habitat

In 2025, the Board will consider revised and/or new ecological priorities for the FIP program.

II. Engagement

In February 2025, OWEB staff began public and tribal engagement on the FIP program ecological priorities. This engagement included an online survey (which as of 5/15/2025 has 98 responses), four virtual public listening sessions, one virtual tribal listening session, written comments provided via email, and various one-on-one conversations with state natural resource agency staff and other interested parties. Attachment A provides input from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Attachment B is a memo provided by the Oregon State University Extension Service Fire Program. At the listening sessions, the conversations were structured around the online survey questions. Other input received broadly also fits within the context of

the survey questions. Attachment C provides a set of the questions asked by staff through the online survey and listening sessions, as well as a summary of the themes on the ecological priorities that were expressed throughout the engagement efforts.

III. Committee Direction on Themes and Next Steps

At the June 3 Partnerships and Capacity committee meeting, staff will present the themes that emerged from the FIP ecological priority engagements efforts and request committee direction on incorporating the themes into draft ecological priorities for consideration by the committee at the September 2 meeting, and the Board at the October 28-29 meeting. Following the October Board meeting, it is expected that further refinements will be made to the draft ecological priorities by staff and the committee, and at the January 27-28 meeting, the Board will consider approving final FIP ecological priorities.

IV. Attachments

A. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Comment Letter
B. OSU Extension Service Fire Program Memo
C. FIP Ecological Priorities Review Engagement Themes

United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office
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Portland, Oregon 97266
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File Number: COMM-241a
File Name: OWEB FIP Priority Comment
TS Number: 25-203
Doc Type: Letter

April 7, 2025

Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board
Attn. Eric Hartstein
775 Summer St, NE #360
Salem, Oregon 97301-1290

Subject: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Comments on Focused Investment Partnership Ecological Priorities

Dear OWEB staff and board,

The Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service), Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office (OFWO) appreciates the opportunity to provide input on the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's (OWEB) Focused Investment Partnership (FIP) grant program and in particular, the categories of ecological priorities that guide this grant program. The FIP Grant Program provides significant funding opportunities for priority conservation actions across the state for a variety of species and ecosystems upon which they depend. The Service has participated in multiple FIP partnerships and through our involvement we believe FIPs are one of the most effective tools available in Oregon to promote healthy ecosystems and uplift for species of conservation need.

Despite the successes of the FIP Program, it has come to our attention that the current FIP ecological priorities, by way of geography or taxa focus, exclude development of FIP proposals for several aquatic-dependent species of conservation need in Oregon, including species of freshwater mollusks, reptiles and amphibians. Specifically for our office, we advocate the list of ecological priorities *not exclude* the ability to develop FIP proposals with a conservation focus for Western ridged mussel (*Gonidea angulata*), petitioned for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, the federally threatened Oregon spotted frog (*Rana pretiosa*) and the proposed federally threatened Northwestern pond turtle (*Actinemys marmorata*).

There are several pathways for addressing this issue. We suggest either an alteration of the

Aquatic Habitat for Native Fish Species priority or an additional priority to allow new FIP partnerships. Our suggestions are as follows:

1) Change the *Aquatic Habitat for Native Fish Species* to *Aquatic Habitat for Native Species of Conservation Need or Habitat for Native Aquatic Species of Conservation Need.* By dropping the fish-centricity of the priority and including aquatic species listed in the State Wildlife Action Plan of the Oregon Conservation Strategy as Species of Greatest Conservation Need, or,
2) Add a priority as *Aquatic Habitat for Native Non-fish Species*. To open needed opportunities that would encompass important non-fish species.

Either of these changes would allow for a FIP to remain focused and will support partnerships to form and develop actions that can create positive change and uplift for Oregon's native aquatic-dependent Species of Conservation Need. The priority memo for the Aquatic Habitat for Native Fish notes that "*Sustaining aquatic biodiversity is essential to the health of our environment and to the quality of human life. Healthy aquatic ecosystems are imperative for continuing to contribute to Oregon's communities and economy, including fisheries and recreation. Because native fish communities are central to the structure, function, and process within aquatic habitats, they serve as ideal indicator species of the overall health of these habitats*". While fish may be an ideal indicator species in some watersheds, they can fail to represent important aquatic ecosystem attributes important for many other taxa and may not be the most sensitive indicators of the overall health of aquatic ecosystems.

We thank OWEB for this opportunity to provide input on this critically important grant program. We are prepared to support OWEB in updating the FIP Ecological Priorities by providing technical input and geospatial data on species' distributions and critical habitat. If you have any questions, please contact Dirk Renner, our Bend Field Office Partners for Fish & Wildlife Biologist, at 541-969-0162.

Sincerely,

KESSINA LEE Digitally signed by KESSINA LEE Date: 2025.04.17 08:34:56 -07'00'

Kessina Lee
State Supervisor
Oregon Fish and Wildlife Office

Enclosures:

Oregon State University
Extension Service
Fire Program

Mr. Eric Hartstein, Senior Policy Coordinator
Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board

April 29th, 2025

Dear Mr. Hartstein,

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB)'s Focused Investment Partnership (FIP) program supports high-performing partnerships across Oregon for up to three biennia (6-years) as they implement landscape-scale restoration and conservation actions in board-identified ecological priorities. OWEB has requested input from partners and subject matter experts regarding whether to make any changes to the existing ecological priorities and if new ecological priorities should be considered. This includes review of habitat technical memos, maps, and theory of change diagrams.

Oregon State University's (OSU) Extension Fire Program greatly appreciates this opportunity for input. We are a statewide team providing outreach, engagement, science application, and capacity building that supports fire-adapted communities and ecosystems. The FIP program is closely aligned with our goals of fostering effective, multi-scale partnerships for collective action. We also recognize that these ecological priorities will help inform solicitation of future FIP projects. As the funding landscape for restoration shifts, this program becomes even more important.

A sub-team from the Extension Fire Program has prepared an attached memo that provides suggestions for revising FIP priorities based on peer-reviewed scientific research and practitioner knowledge of the following topics:

1. Dry forest type habitat (pp. 2-5)
2. Oak woodland and prairie habitat (pp. 6-7)
3. Sage-steppe habitat (pp. 8-10)
4. Cross-cutting topics: Community engagement, governance, and capacity (pp.11-17)

We look forward to your review of this material, and are available for further discussion with yourself and other program staff as desired. Thank you again for this opportunity, and for your support of this essential partnership program.

Respectfully,

Dr. Emily Jane (EJ) Davis, Fire Program Director and Associate Professor (Practice)
Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society, Oregon State University
Corvallis, Oregon 541-520-2688 EmilyJane.Davis@Oregonstate.edu

**Dr. Davis is the sister of Stacy Simanonok, East Cascades Oak Partnership Monitoring Coordinator. This memo was prepared without consultation or other involvement of Mrs. Simanonok.*

MEMO: Input from members of the OSU Extension Fire Program re: OWEB FIP ecological priorities, April 2025

1. Dry forest type habitat

Prepared by Micah Schmidt, Northeast Regional Fire Specialist; and Ariel Cowan, Central Regional Fire Specialist
Reviewed by Dr. Chris Adlam, Southwest Regional Fire Specialist

We recommend the following changes to the OWEB Dry-Type Forest Focused Investment Partnership (FIP). Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback.

CHANGE #1: Change the "Dry-Type Forest" FIP into the "Forests in Dry Regions" FIP and divide into three sub-categories for prioritizing restoration: Klamath-Siskiyou/Southern Cascades Forests, East Cascades Forests, and Blue Mountains Forests.

Dry-type forests are undoubtedly a forest type that should be a high priority for restoration. In addition to dry-type forests, moist mixed conifer forests often overlap significantly and exist directly adjacent to dry-type forests without significant changes in precipitation, elevation, or other environmental variables. Moist mixed conifer forests in proximity to dry-type forests historically experienced fire at the same or similar frequency and severity as dry-type forests and are similarly departed from historical structure and composition due to lack of disturbance (Johnston 2017, Merschel 2018). We recommend including these moist mixed conifer forests at priorities for restoration in southern, central, and eastern Oregon.

The map used in the dry-type forest memo (Haugo et al. 2015) is useful for communicating the need for dry-type forest restoration across vast areas in Oregon, but it is lacking in its ability to prioritize restoration treatments at manageable scales for practitioners due to its reliance on broad-scale datasets that do not accurately reflect fine-scale variability across the landscape. In addition to including moist mixed conifer forests in this FIP, we propose having three sub-categories of forests for prioritizing restoration: Klamath-Siskiyou/Southern Cascades forests, East Cascades forests, and Blue Mountains forests. Within each category, we recommend that FIP proposals do not rely on prioritizing areas ranked as the highest restoration priorities from geospatial models, but rather rely on funding those proposals that thoroughly describe aspects of the project similar to what is listed below:

- Thorough description of the following aspects of the project area:
    - Need for restoration
    - Departure from historical disturbance regimes
    - Risk of severe disturbance in the absence of restoration
    - Vegetation types and patterns
    - Soil erodibility and associated soil impacts
    - Presence of old-growth forest, culturally important areas, and other special habitats and features
    - Infrastructure

- Methods and capacity to accomplish restoration in the project area
- Feasibility and likelihood of the project objectives being achieved
- Plan for monitoring project outcomes
- Description of collaborative groups and partnerships that will support restoration in the project area
- Prior examples of forest restoration projects from the grant applicant
- Etc.

We suggest that working groups are formed across the three categories of dry-type forests to evaluate projects based on a criteria similar to what is listed above. Successful projects should include a solid needs assessment and high likelihood of having high impact to meet the needs assessment.

CHANGE #2: Revise the key limiting factors and/or ecological threats.

We suggest that the key limiting factors and/or ecological threats listed in the dry-type forest priority memo should be changed to the following (changes in **bold**):

- Uncharacteristically **severe** wildfires as a result of fuel buildup **in the absence of fire**, **past and some current** landscape forest management practices**, and hotter and dryer conditions due to climate change.**
- Altered fire regimes resulting in forest densification, **changes in species composition, and more continuous, homogenous fuel conditions across the landscape**
- Loss of **old** forest structure **due to wildfire and past logging practices**
- **More widespread and uncharacteristic** insect and disease outbreaks
- **Invasive species**
- **Lack of land management capacity**

CHANGE #3: Revise some aspects of the theory of change

We support a well-organized theory of change to support each OWEB FIP priority. In addition to suggested changes to the outreach, engagement, and governance aspects of the theories of change for each FIP priority outlined in the cross-cutting section of these recommendations, we suggest the following changes to the theory of change:

- For the long-term outcome of a "mosaic of diverse dry forest habitats . . .", the strategy currently listed is to "protect existing complex forest." While we strongly agree with the strategy to protect those forests, we suggest that the strategy should include utilizing frequent, low-intensity forest management treatments (preferably through thinning young trees followed by prescribed fire) to maintain the complexity of old, complex forests. These forests historically persisted with frequent, low-severity disturbances (Johnston et al. 2017, Merschel et al. 2018, Metlen et al. 2018) and complexity of these forests is likely to deteriorate in the absence of disturbance (Halofsky et al. 2014, Johnston et al 2021, Merschel et al. 2014).
- The long-term outcome "risk, frequency, and severity of wildfire shifts toward desired conditions" lacks clarity on what those desired conditions are. We recommend those

conditions be defined and that they include frequent, low-severity wildfires in areas that do not pose threats to human infrastructure.

CHANGE #4: **Incorporate restoration of post-fire landscapes into priorities**

Currently, FIP priorities do not include post-fire restoration. FIP should provide opportunities to restore landscapes that have experienced recent wildfires. Forests in dry regions are dependent on disturbance, especially wildfire. Many regions in Oregon are experiencing exceptionally uncharacteristic forms of wildfire that can trigger divergence from a landscape's ability to support ecosystem services and maintain its successional cycle. Ecosystem diversity, legacy trees with fire resistance, coarse wood recruitment and other keystone features of these forests are at risk of loss if restoration at critical points in time are not supported post-fire. Without careful restoration, reburn potential could increase at greater frequency and severity, further exacerbating recovery and loss of habitat. Resulting shifts in habitat resources and large homogenized areas of early seral habitat limit the number of species supported and risks loss of functional roles.

Recently burned landscapes, even when initially identified for proposals, often become excluded from applying for FIP grants. There are currently no other sources of funding for post-fire management beyond immediate, reactive, government funding and there are no programs for long term post-fire restoration and management. The FIP program can help fill this gap of well-needed support.

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2. Oak woodland and prairie habitat

Prepared by Aaron Groth, North Coast Regional Fire Specialist
Reviewed by Dr. Chris Adlam, Southwest Regional Fire Specialist

I recommend the following changes to the OWEB Oak Woodland and Prairie Habitat Focused Investment Partnership (FIP) memo and theory of change (TOC). Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback.

MEMO ADJUSTMENTS:

Economic importance of oak woodland and prairie habitat: The lack of economic value attached to oak and prairie hinders restoration efforts. Current forestry rules, regulations, and tax policies prioritize other forest types, creating obstacles for oak and prairie restoration initiatives. The memo could reference this in the "background" section.

Cost of native seeds for restoration: This is an often-significant cost for restoration projects in woodland and prairie areas. The memo could reference this in the "background" section.

Cultural burning and role of Native American Tribes: Acknowledge the cultural significance of these habitats to Native American tribes and their critical role in utilizing cultural fire to sustain culturally important foods (e.g., camas). Ensure this connection is highlighted alongside the ecological benefits of prescribed fire. Emphasize fostering and facilitating increased cultural burning programs. Cultural fire practices are integral to maintaining the health and biodiversity of oak woodlands and prairie habitats. Applications to the FIP program should highlight how their work is aligned with, supports, or is led by Tribes or Tribally led NGOs and organizations.

Prescribed fire programs: Until now, prescribed fire in oak and prairie habitat has mostly been conducted by land managers in public land management agencies and land conservancy organizations. For instance, since 2003, Rivers to Ridges (R2R) Partnership, a voluntary association of 19 agencies and organizations, has worked collaboratively to advance the protection, restoration, and effective management of park and open space resources in the southern Willamette Valley. Prescribed fire is an important tool of the R2R Partnership, albeit with a focus on public lands and land conservancies' properties. To achieve multiple objectives, including habitat conservation, communities across the United States are increasingly self-organizing through locally led Prescribed Burn Associations (PBAs) to plan and implement prescribed burns on private lands (Deak et al., 2025). Over 140 PBAs currently exist nationwide. With most oak and prairie habitat types under private land ownership, it is important to foster and facilitate PBAs in Oregon, including Rogue Valley, Umpqua, and emergent South Willamette, Mid-Valley, and North Valley Foothills groups. FIP grants could include support for PBA coordination, equipment, and trainings. Prescribed fire capacity is also broadly addressed in the cross-cutting section of this document.

THEORY OF CHANGE (TOC) REVISIONS:

Habitat loss and succession planning: Integrate language about habitat loss due to residential development and agriculture. Link these challenges to succession planning and the need for collaboration with city/county zoning departments.

Succession and restoration methods such as oak release: Address the overtaking of oak by Douglas-fir, Grand fir, Bigleaf maple, and other species. Underline the importance of manual and mechanical thinning, pile burning, and the eventual integration of prescribed fire treatments for comprehensive habitat restoration (Harrington and Devine 2004; Vesely et al. 2006).

Outreach and engagement: Expand the outreach section to include strategies for experiential learning and active community engagement in restoration efforts, particularly through prescribed fire and emerging PBAs. Focus on building partnerships with actors such as watershed councils, SWCDs, and land trusts to scale restoration work effectively. The capacity of these groups and their collaboration are key to successful landowner engagement.

Challenges to prescribed fire implementation: Given key obstacles like regulatory limitations, liability concerns, population density, and smoke management challenges, the theory of change should indicate pathways to address these barriers. This could be captured as " Collaborative prescribed fire capacity is developed to address common challenges."

In summary, these changes aim to elevate the memo and TOC, aligning them with ecological, cultural, and regulatory complexities while emphasizing actionable solutions.

REFERENCES

Compass is the interactive map of ODFW, highlighting Strategy Conservation Opportunity Areas, including oak and prairie habitat. https://www.compass.dfw.state.or.us/visualize/#x=-122.62&y=44.33&z=8&logo=true&dls%5B%5D=true&dls%5B%5D=0.75&dls%5B%5D=549&dls%5B%5D=true&dls%5B%5D=0.5&dls%5B%5D=627&basemap=ESRI+Physical&themes%5Bids%5D%5B%5D=33&tab=data&print=false

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3. Sage-steppe habitat

Prepared by Dr. Katie Wollstein, Rangeland Regional Fire Specialist
Reviewed by Dr. Cameron Duquette, The Nature Conservancy, Eastern Oregon Agricultural Research Center

We applaud the intention to prioritize initiatives for sagebrush/sage-steppe habitat that will "…achieve ecological outcomes over time at the landscape scale," as stated in the current Summary Statement of Priority for investment. To support this position, we provide recommendations for updating how priority areas are identified, so projects and actions will effectuate these desired landscape scale changes. These recommendations are largely based on the Defend the Core, Grow the Core and Threat-Based Strategic Conservation frameworks, supported by the Sagebrush Conservation Design and other more recent products useful for visualizing ecosystem function and threats.

Overall, the sole focus on sage-grouse populations to define priority areas for investment in sagebrush/sage-steppe (i.e., existing PACs and connectivity corridors) precludes more recent, science-based approaches and tools for large landscape conservation. We recommend that this FIP instead focuses on ecosystem function rather than sage-grouse habitat and population objectives (Davies et al. 2011, Chambers et al. 2017, Doherty et al, 2021). While sage-grouse are indeed indicator species, exclusively using the PACs to guide investments assumes that those investments are most effective where sage-grouse currently exist, and in the corridors connecting those locations. There may be several reasons why sage-grouse may be absent from an area; their absence does not necessarily mean that such places are not crucial investments for ensuring long-term resilience and ecosystem functionality (Doherty et al. 2021). Ideally, such areas will become sage-grouse population strongholds in the future with appropriate investments.

CHANGE #1

While the ODFW's PAC maps are a useful layer to start to visualize where there is "good" functional sagebrush/sage-steppe habitat (updated in 2023; see References below), additional information can be useful to inform where to strategically invest in promoting ecosystem function, growing these "good" areas and defending them from ecosystem threats (i.e., juniper encroachment, annual grass invasion, and wildfire; Davies et al. 2011). That is, priorities should be informed by where there is currently "core," heathy and functioning sagebrush/sage-steppe, and where core areas can feasibly be grown based on abiotic and biotic qualities of surrounding areas (i.e., "Growth" areas). This approach to large landscape conservation uses the "Defend the Core, Grow the Core" and Threat-Based Strategic Conservation frameworks (see Creutzburg et al. 2022 and SageCon Partnership, 2025); the Sagebrush Conservation Design (SCD) maps these as Core and Growth Sagebrush Areas (CSAs and GSAs, respectively; Doherty et al. 2022).

CHANGE #2

Our second recommendation is to use the SCD's maps of Oregon's CSAs and GSAs in concert with the updated PAC maps to more inclusively visualize where investments will be most strategic, that is, where they will make the biggest difference for ecosystem function (see Supporting References for information on accessing the SCD map). While sage-grouse core habitat and CSAs/GSAs in the PAC and SCD maps (respectively) largely coincide, we view the

rationale underpinning the use of these maps to be an essential addition to this FIP, especially if sage-grouse populations decline in the mapped PACs.

CHANGE #3

Lastly, additional geospatial visualizations such as the Heatload Elevation Index, available on SageCon's Landscape Planning Tool, may be used to further discern where proposed actions are most likely to be successful, by incorporating information about the biotic and abiotic resistance and resilience of "growth" areas identified using the SCD or PAC maps (SageCon Partnership 2025). These data inform the likelihood of habitat suitability in the future, as well as the likelihood of achieving desired management outcomes following interventions such as seeding, planting, and herbicide applications to treat invading annual grasses. For instance, some rehabilitation efforts such as native reseeding will be most successful in "growth" areas with higher resistance to annual grass invasion and resilience to disturbance such as fire (i.e., rated low on the Heatload Elevation Index; Anthony and Germin, 2023, Applestein and Germino 2025).

In summary, we suggest that presently occupied sage-grouse habitat does not entirely define the focus and priorities of the sagebrush/sage-steppe habitat FIP. Instead, embracing the "Defend the Core, Grow the Core" lens can be useful in visualizing where there is currently core sagebrush/sage-steppe and where is there potential for there to be core sagebrush/sage-steppe in the future if investments are made. This is especially vital given several very active fire years (particularly 2012, 2014, 2024) that extensively impacted sagebrush and sage-steppe habitat in eastern Oregon; focusing investments on actions in places that will prevent further loss of core and support the recovery of historically core areas will be essential for conservation of this ecosystem.

REFERENCES

- The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted the updated maps of sage-grouse Priority Areas for Conservation in December 2023. The updated and approved core and low density habitat map can be viewed here or these spatial layers can be viewed and downloaded on the SageCon Landscape Planning Tool.
- The maps produced by the Sagebrush Conservation Design (Doherty et al., 2022) can also be viewed and downloaded on the SageCon Landscape Planning Tool—click "Oregon Sagebrush Conservation Design Geographic Strategy layer under Rangeland Vegetation Conditions

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4. Cross-cutting topics: Community engagement, governance, and capacity

Prepared by Dr. Emily Jane Davis, Fire Program Director and Associate Professor (Practice)
Reviewed by Dr, Kayla Bordelon, Willamette Valley and North Cascades Regional Fire Specialist; and Carrie Berger, Fire Program Manager

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

OWEB FIB technical memos for each habitat type focus on ecological and management aspects rather than outreach and engagement. But each theory of change diagram includes outreach and engagement as a strategy (Figure 1). These strategies commonly focus on description, information delivery, awareness, and understanding. They erroneously assume that if sufficient knowledge and awareness is built among community members, community support will therefore increase, which will result in implementation of desired management actions. In dry forest and oak woodland and prairie habitats, the described role of community members is to receive information and support restoration actions. In sage-steppe habitat, outreach and engagement focuses on increasing landowners' awareness of available programs and their enrollment in those, which is assumed to then translate to public values and recognition of the importance of sage-grouse habitats.

Other human dimensions, namely the governance of a FIP, are not included as a strategy or within the results chain of the theories of change. We consider governance as the structures and processes of decision making in a FIP. This incorporates roles of participating organizations, partnership structure and functioning, involvement of Tribal Nations and Indigenous practitioners, and support for prescribed fire capacity building.

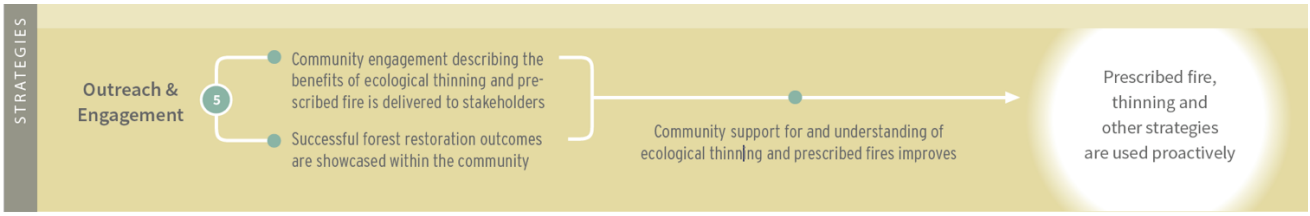

Figure 1. Outreach and engagement strategies for (from top to bottom) dry forest type, oak woodland and prairie, and sage-steppe habitats as described in their respective theory of change diagrams.

As currently written, outreach and engagement-related strategies assume that ecological information delivery leads to community support for conservation practices which leads to increased implementation. Research recognizes this assumption as oversimplified and that instead, communities are more engaged partners in restoration (Cross and Chappell 2022). To remedy this fallacy, we suggest several considerations for reenvisioning the role of community outreach and engagement in FIP partnerships. We encourage OWEB to adopt new terms and conceptions of how communities can be involved with FIP partnerships. This would center on a shift from passive information "delivery" towards more active community "engagement." A recent OSU Extension Fire Program publication describes the distinction thusly:

> *"Engagement describes active community participation in wildfire preparedness, wherein local people are key partners alongside government agencies and authorities. It means that solutions and actions are shared through interaction, mutual learning, and relationships. In contrast, more passive involvement consists of community members receiving information from authorities through messaging (e.g., brochures, public service announcements, informational presentations). Engagement still involves expertise and education, but it's a shift in mindset from information delivery and one-way communication toward a more balanced sharing of knowledge and decision-making among everyone involved* (Davis et al. 2025)."

FIP partnerships can involve communities on a spectrum of approaches from provision of information to deeper engagement, dependent on the scale of work, issue, place, and need. Not all involvement must be in-depth engagement, particularly given resource, capacity, and jurisdictional contexts. However, shifting community involvement paradigms away from one-directional communication may offer many positive outcomes. Engagement approaches can bring more ideas, skills, and resources to bear on partnerships or projects. They can also grow the breadth and depth of involvement in strategic ways. In addition, the experiences and relationships associated with these approaches can help make the often-hard work of coordinated restoration more rewarding and meaningful.

Research and practice suggest many ways to foster more engaged approaches. In brief, some considerations are to:

> **Develop tailored approaches:** It is common to focus broadly on "the general public" and offer messages that may feel generic to community members. Instead, identifying specific groups, learning about their interests and needs, and developing targeted outreach/engagement strategies and materials may be more effective at reaching people (DeLorme et al. 2017). Targeted approaches invite practitioners to learn about how people relate to a place/project area, their values and future goals, how they tend to share and receive information, how they prefer to work together, and their trust in relevant entities. This tailoring can also include supports that could make it easier for some community members to engage, such as providing translation or interpretation, hot nourishing food at events, and connections to useful resources.

Incorporate principles of adult learning: There is substantial evidence that many adults learn best from interactive and experiential engagement that builds on their own knowledge and motivations (National Research Council 2009). This can involve learning from community members' knowledge and experience during meetings and outreach events. Offering opportunities for community members to ask questions and explore assumptions can help them reflect on how new understandings can be incorporated into their existing knowledge and support their decision-making relevant to conservation practices. Away to improve learning outcomes is to develop specific, relevant learning objectives for education and engagement programming. These describe in plain language what someone should be able *to do* because of education program, and support practitioners in moving away from generic goals of increasing community awareness or understanding.

Include active and empowering roles for community members*:* Community members may become more engaged and supportive of restoration efforts if they see a role for themselves and their skills/knowledge beyond serving as recipients of information. Those who are not private landowners may want to be involved by helping share information in their networks, volunteering, and participating in meetings and decision processes where possible.

Shifts in response to the above considerations could include ceasing use of terms such as *delivery/delivered, showcase/d, describe/ing, the public, support, and understanding* in habitat memos, theory of change diagrams, and solicitation materials. Instead, terms of *engage/ment/ing, shared or mutual learning, participation; specific identifiers for defined groups of people by role, place, or interest; and specific outcomes for how people are involved in the work and decision-making structures* could be substituted.

A shift to engagement could additionally be supported by solicitation materials that encourage and fund needs or asset assessments, dialogue and listening sessions, or other opportunities for co-learning with communities and community-based organizations to encourage FIP partners to develop a more nuanced understanding of stakeholder needs, assets, priorities and concerns. Offering or directing FIP partners to resources and skills-building about engagement, adult learning, social learning, and empowering collaborative structures may also support their capacity growth in this arena.

GOVERNANCE AND CAPACITY

The human dimensions of restoration, particularly in landscape-scale efforts, also extend beyond community outreach and engagement. Governance is key to how collective action efforts like FIP partnerships define their purpose, develop plans, and implement restoration (Lemos and Agrawal 2006).

We appreciate that OWEB's approach to governance is evidence-based and nuanced. OWEB has been a leader in supporting place-based organizations to lead restoration and water quality initiatives in ways that make sense in their local areas, while also providing merit criteria and

assistance from the state level. OWEB has also commissioned third-party analysis to derive insights about capacity and partnerships. The Partnership Learning Project has generated numerous findings about FIP governance (Arnold 2017, 2018, 2023); namely, that there are different partnership models rather than a one-size approach, but that there are also common factors in partnerships' resilience and performance. The Capacity Matters Project aligns with the Partnership Learning Project, depicting different models for local organizations (councils and districts) while also characterizing how these organizations can grow and lose capacity (Downey et al. 2023).

We suggest that OWEB apply findings from these studies to explicitly incorporate governance as a strategy in the theories of change alongside the strategies for outreach and engagement, and articulate how governance may drive outcomes. This strategy may look something like: *Partnership models fit the ecological, social, and organization context of the FIP area → Partners act collectively to plan, implement, and adapt restoration →Long-term capacity for landscape stewardship is built.*

Additional relevant considerations from research and practice include:

> **Boundary spanning and matching tools, rules, and actors:** Recent research describes how current land and fire management in rangelands does not operate at the "right" scales to support collective action (Wollstein and Johnson 2023). In the context of wildfire risk more generally, actors involved often have their own respective rules, cultures, and authorities that can challenge coordination (Davis et al. 2021). To address these issues, finding the right spatial and temporal scale for partnerships is important, as is building in time and resources for all involved to be able to work at the chosen scale. It may be useful to ask FIP applicants to define the scale(s) that their partnerships operate at and how those are sized to the restoration need *and* the social and organizational capacity to respond.
>
> **Roles of Tribal Nations and Indigenous peoples***:* OWEB has dedicated staff capacity, policy, and grant programs for work with Tribal Nations and Indigenous practitioners. We suggest guidance that invites FIP applicants to reflect on the roles of Tribal Nations and Indigenous peoples/practitioners in the past, present, and future of each habitat type. FIP applicants should be asked to explicitly identify treatment of Tribal sovereignty, data sovereignty, multiple ways of knowing, and cultural practices within projects (Jacobson et al. 2021, Long and Lake 2018)." FIP theories of change could identify Indigenous fire stewardship, including cultural burning practices, as distinct from prescribed fire (Lake and Christiansen 2020, Adlam et al. 2022, Coughlan et al. 2023).
>
> **Prescribed fire capacity:** Prescribed fire is not in use at the needed levels to support forest restoration in the western United States (Kolden 2019). Common barriers are lack of capacity and funding, and risk aversion among land and fire managers (Schultz et al. 2019). In many places, those barriers are more significant than air quality or private landowner liability concerns. This also indicates that increasing prescribed fire implementation is not a matter of generating more public support. Given this, not all

upland FIPs may be able to implement large acreages and contiguous areas of prescribed burning.

Suggested solutions are to establish local, collaborative venues to share resources, jointly develop funding streams, and increase training opportunities, such as through prescribed burn associations (PBAs) and interagency partnerships (Deak et al. 2025, Marks-Block and Tripp 2021). In Oregon, there are also new tools to create more capacity including the Certified Burn Manager Program and prescribed fire liability pilot (Oregon Department of Forestry n.d.), and trainings offered by Oregon State University Extension. We suggest that prescribed fire in FIP projects be evaluated not merely by acres treated, but also or instead by capacity and relationships built. This could include outcomes such as but not limited to: PBAs established or expanded, interagency or partnership agreements signed to facilitate resource sharing, educational events hosted, certified burn managers involved, and any changes in networks and connectivity among local landowners and prescribed fire managers. In addition, we suggest some knowledge-sharing with the OWEB staff, board, and FIP partners who may be less familiar with prescribed fire. Local partners who are implementing prescribed fire work, as well as OSU Extension personnel and agency staff, could provide learning sessions or support.

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END OF REPORT

FIP Ecological Priorities Review
Engagement Themes

Question: After reviewing the existing OWEB Board FIP Ecological Priorities, select all you would recommend to the OWEB Board to keep.

Themes

- Consensus that existing FIP ecological priorities have value and should either be maintained in current form or merged with a different ecological priority.

Question: Are there any ecological priorities you would retire? If yes, list and briefly describe.

Themes

- Most felt existing priorities should not be retired.
- A few comments advocate for retiring some priorities, with others suggesting a narrower geographic focus across the priorities.
- Some comments noted that it would be beneficial to see how conservation /restoration progress has occurred across the priorities, particularly Sagebrush/Sage-Steppe habitat, before further investments are made.

Question: Are there any ecological priorities you would combine? If yes, list and briefly describe.

Themes

- There are advocates for combining ecological priorities, particularly Coho Habitat and Populations Along the Coast with Aquatic Habitat for Native Fish Species and/or Coastal Estuaries.

Question: Are there any ecological priorities that you would revise? If yes, list and briefly describe.

Themes

- Broaden the Aquatic Habitat for Native Fish Species to include other native aquatic species (particularly Oregon Spotted Frog, but other species of note include Western Pond Turtle and various freshwater mussels). *
- Update Sagebrush/Sage-Steppe Habitat priority with new data related to both existing sage-grouse core habitat and high-quality vegetation that may not currently host sage-grouse populations but does provide habitat for other species within the ecological priority.

* Indicates theme that may require significant workload to incorporate into FIP ecological priorities.

- Reprioritizing certain watersheds as “high priority” in the existing Aquatic Habitat for Native Fish Species. *
- Highlight habitat connectivity across all ecological priorities.
- Update Dry-type Forest Habitat priority map to reflect more current analysis and revisions to the key limiting factors and/or ecological threats. *
- Emphasize that wet prairie is an eligible focus within the Oak Woodland and Prairie Habitat priority. Consider dropping “Woodland” from the title.
- Expand upon the importance of both prescribed and cultural burning and foods within the Dry-type Forest Habitat and Oak Woodland and Prairie Habitat priorities. Include capacity for prescribed and cultural burning as a higher priority limiting factor than community acceptance.
- Include assisted migration in Dry-type Forest Habitat and Oak Woodland and Prairie Habitat priorities.

Question: Are there new ecological priorities you propose to be added? If yes, what is the habitat type that you propose to become a new FIP ecological priority.

Themes

- Similar comments as above: expanded aquatic habitat for native species, wildlife habitat connectivity, wet prairie/meadow habitats, etc.
- Incorporating post-disturbance recovery into ecological priorities.
- Climate change *
- Broadening Dry-type Forest Habitat to include other forest habitat types. *
- Highlighting importance of cold water refugia and riparian habitats within aquatic habitat priority.
- Expanded coastal habitats *
- Focus on areas experiencing extreme water stress *

Question: Is there anything else you want OWEB staff and Board to know as we review and potentially revise the existing OWEB FIP Ecological Priorities?

Themes

- Appreciation for FIP program

* Indicates theme that may require significant workload to incorporate into FIP ecological priorities.

Oregon
Tina Kotek, Governor

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Partnerships and Capacity Committee

FROM: Courtney Shaff, Monitoring and Reporting Program Manager
Brian Wolcott, Water Acquisitions and Capacity Programs Coordinator

SUBJECT: 2025-2027 Watershed Council Operating Capacity Staff Funding Recommendation
June 3, 2025, Partnerships and Capacity Committee Meeting

I. Background

For more than 20 years, OWEB has provided operating capacity grants to watershed councils. The council capacity application and review process include an eligibility determination and initial and secondary merit reviews. Merit criteria (Attachment A) evaluate councils for performance and progress, including how the council addresses challenges. Fifty-six applicants applied by the deadline. Fifty-one councils did satisfy all the merit criteria review in the initial review. Councils that do not meet all the merit criteria during the initial review participate in the secondary review process, which includes an interview with a technical review team.

II. Results of the secondary review process

Five watershed councils were interviewed as a part of the secondary review process. OWEB staff develop a funding recommendation after the secondary review with consideration of 1) the council capacity application materials; 2) supplemental materials provided by the council as part of the secondary review process; 3) reviewers' assessment of the council against the merit criteria, 4) OWEB staff input; and 5) the interview with council staff and board. Brief summaries are provided below for each council that was part of the secondary review process. The full evaluations will be provided to the board and the watershed councils ahead of the July Board meeting.

Full Funding

Three watershed councils – Coquille Watershed Association, Middle Deschutes Watershed Council, and Sherman County Area Watershed Council – demonstrated they met all the merit criteria and are recommended for full funding.

Reduced Funding

One watershed council – Sandy River Watershed Council – demonstrated they met some, but not all the merit criteria. Since the councils did not meet all of the merit criteria they are recommended for reduced funding, based on OWEB's Council Capacity merit criteria, which are in the board adopted Councill Capacity Guidance document.

Do Not Fund

One watershed council – Umatilla Basin Watershed Council – demonstrated inadequate performance across all merit criteria and is not recommended for funding.

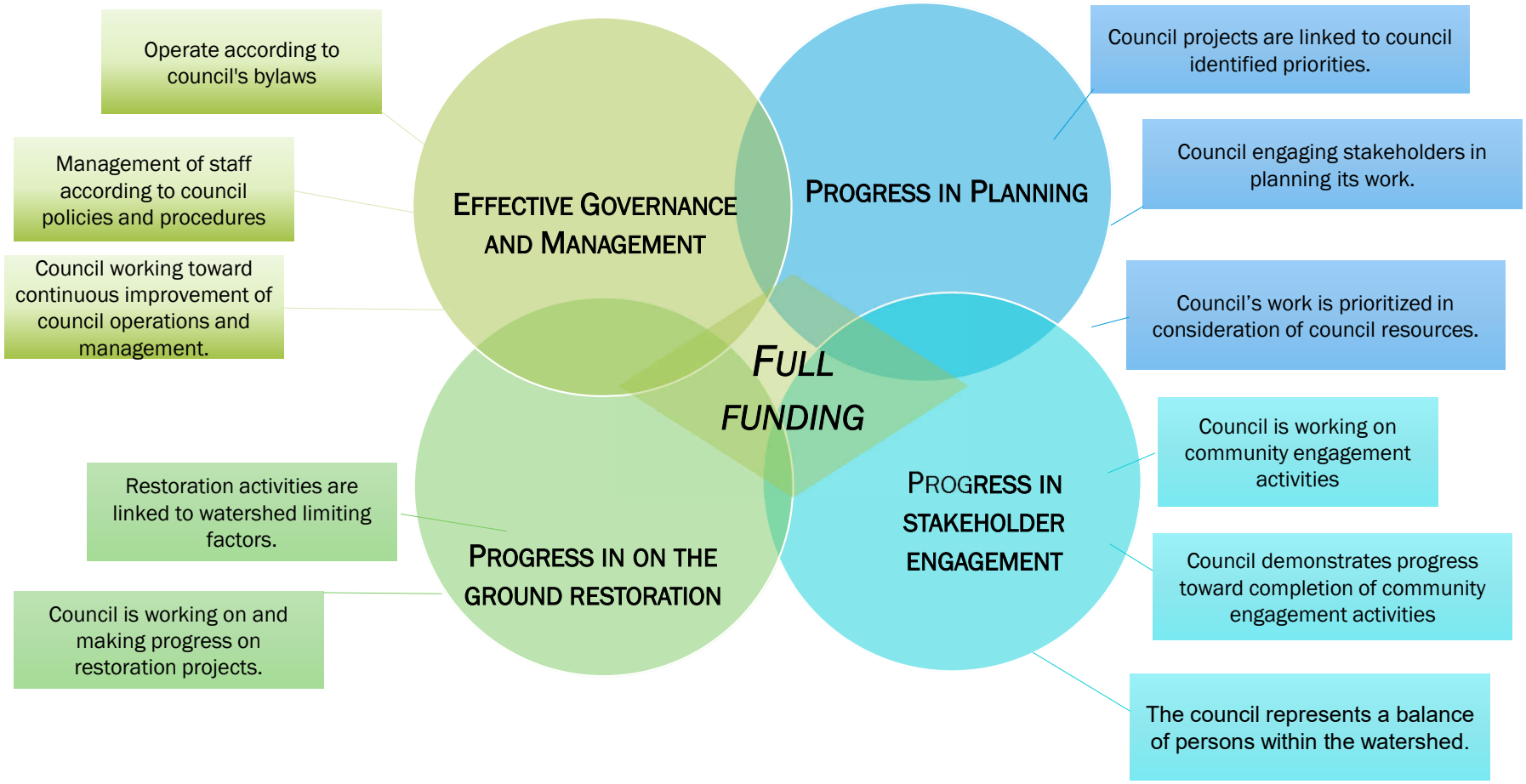
III. Next Steps

Staff are seeking feedback from the OWEB Board Partnerships and Capacity Committee, specifically if there are questions staff can answer around these recommendations so we can be prepared for the July Board meeting.

IV. Attachments

A. Merit Criteria
B. Draft Evaluations for the councils in the Secondary Review Process

Merit Criteria



Application # 226-011

Project Name: Coquille Watershed Association Council Capacity Application

Applicant: Coquille Watershed Association

Application Description

This council capacity grant will support the work of the Coquille Watershed Association. The mission of the Association is to work collaboratively with landowners to develop and implement voluntary watershed restoration, enhancement, and engagement activities that promote healthy and resilient ecosystems and economies in the Coquille Watershed. The Coquille Watershed is located on the South Coast of Oregon and the office of the Association is located in Coquille, OR. The Association is a 501c3 non-profit and as such it has limited funding to support the capacity of the organization (paying the Executive Director and Officer Manager salaries, paying utilities, paying for professional services such as IT and watershed accounting, etc.). This funding will be used to support the infrastructure of the organization so that the organization is healthy and well run. This investment will result in effective and efficient programming on the ground to improve watershed health. Key partners for this Association's work include a) CoqWA Board of Directors, b) ranchers, c) local, state, and federal agencies, d) private foundations, e) timber companies, f) the Coquille Indian Tribe and g) private land owners.

Review

Strengths

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates some ***progress in governance and management***. The board has recently lost some of its members, and there is also concern about board member engagement and providing staff management and oversight. The council has recently worked with a consultant to complete an organizational assessment to address their capacity and governance issues and are now using that to inform board improvements and thoughtful recruitment of additional board members. An accountant is developing recommendations for improvements to their financial reporting methods.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective progress in planning***. The Council recently updated their five-year strategic plan, updating watershed improvement priorities and actions.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective progress in on-the-ground watershed restoration***. The council is making progress on design and implementation of existing projects and planning for future restoration projects.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective progress in community engagement for watershed restoration*** **purposes**. The council has been engaging the community at events and has recently completed a two-year outreach plan and has hired an outreach staff person for this work.

Concerns

The council has struggled with retaining staff and fiscal management and oversight and is working with a consultant and accountant to improve governance and management. The reviewers encourage the council to continue to engage with the consultant and accountant throughout the 2025-2027 biennium to ensure they continue to stay focused on improved governance and management.

Concluding Analysis

The council has demonstrated progress in all merit criteria and is recommended for full funding. Staffing turnovers have created challenges, yet the council has continued to plan, design, and implement restoration projects. The council seems to be informed by the recently completed organizational assessment and is now working on the recommended improvements. Coquille WA needs to recruit and train additional board members that will be actively engaged in improving governance and overseeing the council's work, including better financial accounting and reporting. They also need to hire an executive director.

Recommendations

Staff Recommendation to the Board: Full base funding: meets all merit criteria
Staff Recommended Award: $
Staff Conditions: TBD

Application # 226-044

Project Name: Middle Deschutes Watershed Council Capacity 2025-2027

Applicant: Jefferson SWCD

Application Description

1) The Middle Deschutes Watershed Council is a community-driven organization focused on engaging local partners and landowners in ecological restoration of the Middle Deschutes Watershed. The Middle Deschutes watershed covers 619,473 acres largely in Jefferson county, including small portions of Wasco and Crook counties, and is largely defined by the drainages of Willow and Trout creeks: two tributaries of the Deschutes River. 2) Both creeks and many of their contributing streams support sensitive Redband Trout, and Trout Creek is the major spawning and rearing tributary to the Deschutes River for summer steelhead. Additionally, the Middle Deschutes watershed supports important Mule deer winter range habitat. Aquatic, riparian and upland systems within the watershed have been degraded due to a long history of intensive agriculture, channelization of streams, and encroachment of juniper leading to diminished water quality and quantity and loss and fragmentation of key habitat. In light of increasingly frequent drought in the region and a rapidly expanding population (Jefferson Co. has the 5th fastest growth rate in the State) further stressing vulnerable habitats, the need for on-the-ground restoration is high. 3) This grant would help to address watershed health primarily by adding council capacity for planning and implementing on-the-ground restoration activities within the watershed. These activities will seek to improve water quantity and habitat through treating encroaching juniper, addressing forest health, improving riparian habitat (e.g. riparian revegetation, exclusion fencing, and spring developments), and improving water storage capacity and water quality via beaver dam analogs and meadow restoration. 4) Project partners will include: USFS, ODFW, ODF, TNC, Deschutes Land Trust, City of Madras, NUID, Trout Unlimited, NRCS, ODA, Jefferson County School District, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, OSU-Extension, and Jefferson and Wasco SWCDs.

Review

Strengths

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates effective ***governance and management***. The board is representative of the diverse interests and geography of the watershed and board members regularly attend council meetings. The council is seeking to expand representation to include the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs and a state agency representative. The council recently held officer elections and is providing support and management of the council coordinator, in coordination with the SWCD, which is the employer. The council has done a better job of posting meeting minutes on its website.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates *some* ***progress in planning***. The council has not updated their watershed action plan since 2015 but is currently wrapping up a Trout Creek basin assessment that is identifying and prioritizing restoration actions. The council plans to use the assessment to connect with local and regional partners to plan and prioritize future restoration actions.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective progress in community engagement for watershed restoration*** **purposes**. The council has been engaging well with the community at a variety of events, including one-on-one meetings with landowners. The council is also coordinating locally and regionally with a variety of agencies and organizations to support engagement and restoration actions. The council has successfully applied for and received a diversity of funding sources to support youth focused engagement, which would not be eligible with OWEB funding.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective progress in on-the-ground watershed restoration***. The council does not have a large portfolio of projects but is making progress on design and implementation of existing projects and planning future restoration projects. The council functions in both a lead role on some projects and a supportive role with others, as an example by taking on tasks such as monitoring.

Concerns

The council is supported by Jefferson SWCD and one council coordinator. The council should continue to collaborate with the Jefferson SWCD District Manager on staff oversight and management to ensure the single staff person has sufficient support and guidance in carrying out the council's mission.

Concluding Analysis

The council has demonstrated progress in all merit criteria and is recommended for full funding. The council, up until recently, has struggled with frequent staff turnover. As a one staff organization this has had a significant impact. However, the current coordinator has been helping to establish a conservation role for the council and has been successfully securing grants and managing projects. The council will be updating their action plan during this upcoming biennium. The council has identified floodplain reconnection and riparian revegetation as priorities and will expand its landowner engagement to pursue these actions. The council board should consider ways it can provide support and guidance for staff.

Recommendations

Staff Recommendation to the Board: Full base funding: meets all merit criteria
Staff Recommended Award: $
Staff Conditions: TBD

Application # 226-046

Project Name: Sherman County Area Watershed Council Capacity Grant

Applicant: Sherman SWCD

Application Description

In 2008 watershed councils of Sherman County consolidated to make one watershed council, the Sherman County Area Watershed Council. Existing watershed councils that combined to form this council were, North Sherman County Watershed Council, Grass Valley Canyon Watershed Council, South Sherman County Watershed Council, and Pine Hollow/Jackknife Watershed Council. Sherman County is located in north central Oregon in between three rivers, the Columbia to the north, Deschutes to the west, and the John Day to the east. The south county border is defined by the rugged canyons of Buck Hollow, a tributary of the Deschutes. The Sherman County Area Watershed Council serves as an "Umbrella council" addressing watershed management issues in the existing Sherman County watersheds and is the leading organization for habitat protection and watershed restoration. The Sherman County Area Watershed contains 521 miles of stream habitat for summer Steelhead and Redband trout. The rivers that border Sherman County also provide habitat for Chinook Salmon and Bull Trout. Limiting factors for watershed health include high stream temperatures due to a lack of riparian vegetation, erosion and sedimentation, high peak flows with low summer flows, and invasive plant species. By addressing the source of erosion and sedimentation water quality is improved. In addition, projects focus on restoring riparian health to decrease water temperature and decrease variability in stream flow. The Council is planning 1 monitoring and 1 restoration project currently in progress, planning another and as always have our Small Grant funding opportunity. Our Neighborhood Meetings and other projects for community and landowner engagement are planned yearly. Project partners include residents and landowners of Sherman County, Sherman County Schools, Natural Resource Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, Gilliam County SWCD and Wasco SWCD.

Review

Strengths

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates some ***progress in effective governance and management***. The board only met three times during the 2023-2025 biennium, but board members have been checking in with staff and attending ad hoc meetings as needed to support the council coordinator. The small, yet engaged, board members have kept the council going with assistance from Sherman SWCD. The council has made progress on filling board vacancies

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates some ***progress in planning***. The Council has been using its 2019 Action Plan and meetings with landowners to plan and prioritize its work. The review team recommends the council update the 2019 action plan during the 2025-2027 biennium to plan and prioritize future restoration actions.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective progress in community engagement for watershed restoration*** **purposes**. The council has been engaging the community at

neighborhood meetings with producers as an effective way to promote and develop projects with local partners and landowners.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective progress in on-the-ground watershed restoration***. The council has been implementing one large restoration grant and several small grants during the 2023-2025 biennium.

Concerns

None

Concluding Analysis

The council demonstrated it meets all of OWEB's merit criteria and is recommended for full funding. Up until recently the council has struggled with hiring staff and this was a factor in not applying for capacity funding last biennium, however the council was able to continue to operate, at reduced capacity thanks to support and collaboration with the SWCD. Now that the council has a coordinator on staff, they are making progress on community engagement and developing and implementing restoration projects. The council is trying to fill open board seats. The council would benefit from continued planning and prioritization and could consider completing an assessment of natural resource needs in their area. OWEB staff encourage the council and SWCD to continue to collaborate to build and sustain capacity across the watershed while maintaining the two distinct organizations serving the local communities' needs.

Recommendations

Staff Recommendation to the Board: Full base funding: meets all merit criteria
Staff Recommended Award: $
Staff Conditions: N/A

Application # 226-065

Project Name: Sandy River Watershed Council Capacity Grant

Applicant: Cascade Pacific RC&D

Application Description

The Sandy River Watershed Council will lead restoration and community engagement activities in the Sandy River basin and its tributaries. The Sandy and its tributaries represent a wild salmon stronghold and connected corridor of biodiversity, as well as the water supply for nearly 1/3 of Oregon's population and a year-round outdoor destination that is at the heart of regional quality of life.

SRWC will lead in-stream, riparian, and community engagement activities to improve habitat and gain stakeholder commitment in priority sub-basins identified in Sandy River Basin Partners and other restoration plans.

Review

Strengths

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective governance and management***. The newly formed board has developed a very inclusive mission, and has created a charter, bylaws, policies, and procedures. The council is taking a thoughtful approach to recruiting additional board members and initiating their staff hiring process.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates some ***progress in planning***. The Council has recently completed a Strategic Plan that identifies the need to build relationships with Tribal, state, federal agencies, and local organizations that will result in the development of community-driven restoration projects. The planning of the council has been very focused on engagement, which is appropriate for a newly forming council, however OWEB staff encourage the council to also plan for its future role in on-the–ground restoration actions within the watershed.

OWEB staff found the council demonstrates ***effective progress in community engagement for watershed restoration*** **purposes**. The council has completed a Community Needs Assessment that received 200 survey responses, worked with six focus groups, and has attended and hosted several community meetings.

Concerns

OWEB staff found the council does not meet the merit criteria for **effective progress in on-the-ground watershed restoration,** as they are newly formed and focused on reorganization and not on project implementation during the 2023-2025 biennium. The council did collaborate some with Clackamas Community College and East Multnomah SWCD on restoration projects those organizations were implementing in the watershed. The council plans to continue to engage with local partners to plan and implement future restoration actions.

Concluding Analysis

The Sandy River council is newly formed and demonstrated through the application materials and secondary review that it met some, but not all, of the merit criteria. The council did not apply for Council Capacity funding in the 2023-2025 biennium. As part of its formative work the council utilized grant funding from foundations to complete an extensive engagement and outreach campaign with the diverse communities in the basin and has developed a new board representing the basin's diversity. The council is being thoughtful in its approach to forming and has focused a significant amount of time on the creation of a charter, policies and procedures, a community needs assessment, a strategic plan, and is working to develop a plan for future staffing. The council has not planned or implemented on-the ground restoration and recognizes it needs to find its own niche in the watershed, which already includes several organizations that are engaged in large-scale restoration. The council needs to use the results of its significant community engagement to plan for future restoration actions.

Recommendations

Staff Recommendation to the Board: Reduced funding: does not meet all merit criteria
Staff Recommended Award:
Staff Conditions: TBD

Application # 226-053

Project Name: UBWC Council Capacity 2025-2027

Applicant: Umatilla Basin WS Foundation

Application Description

The Umatilla Basin Watershed Council (UBWC) operates within the Umatilla Basin in Umatilla County, Oregon, with its main office in Pendleton. The watershed has historically supported six anadromous fish species, including Steelhead (Oncorhynchus mykiss), Spring and Fall Chinook Salmon (Oncorhynchus tshawytscha), Coho Salmon (Oncorhynchus kisutch), and Pacific Lamprey (Lampetra tridentata). Additionally, Bull Trout (Salvelinus confluentus) and Mountain Whitefish (Prosopium williamsoni) inhabit its upper headwaters. Due to habitat degradation and outdated infrastructure, Bull Trout and Summer Steelhead are currently listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The UBWC is currently in a transitional phase, with no active staff and only three remaining board members. The Walla Walla Basin Watershed Council (WWBWC) is stepping in to provide support during this capacity-building period, which will focus on recruiting new board members and developing a strategic path forward for the organization. This two-year effort will serve as a pivotal time for growth and direction-setting, ensuring the UBWC can continue to serve the watershed and community effectively. During this period, UBWC, with assistance from WWBWC, will explore opportunities to apply for engagement grants and begin assessing potential future restoration projects. The project partners will continue to include local, state, and federal agencies, tribal organizations, landowners, and community members, all working together to ensure effective and sustainable watershed restoration efforts. This project represents an exciting opportunity to rebuild and strengthen UBWC's role in watershed stewardship in the Umatilla Basin.

Review

The council demonstrates ***some progress in on-the ground watershed restoration*.** The council, with much support from project partners and hired contractors, was able to complete a fish passage restoration project, and complete designs for a future restoration project.

Concerns

The council ***does not demonstrate effective governance and management.*** The council is struggling to have a quorum at board meetings. The council does not have a plan for recruiting new board members or addressing the current organizational challenges. The council does not have a clear plan for hiring a new executive director and has not described how guidance and oversight of staff would occur. The council is working with the Walla Walla WC for support and guidance and seems open to looking at collaboration opportunities between the two councils in the future.

OWEB staff found the council ***does not demonstrate progress in planning***. The council is working with the County and local partners on guidance on the future role of the council. The council is relying on planning documents completed by local partners. The council would benefit from completing its own strategic plan that could be used to guide the council in its restoration and community engagement efforts.

OWEB staff found the council ***does not demonstrate progress in community engagement for watershed restoration purposes***. With no staff over the last year and the loss of several board members, community engagement has been minimal. With only three board members, the council does not currently represent a balance of interests in the watershed.

Concluding Analysis

The council has not met OWEB's merit criteria and did not address the concerns identified in the 2023-2025 council capacity evaluation. The council does not demonstrate effective governance and management and would benefit from setting operational guidance and strategic direction. The council has not made progress in planning and has not updated their 2014 action plan. The council did make limited progress toward on-the-ground restoration, but was reliant on partners for implementation, and does not have a plan for prioritizing and implementing future projects. The review team did recognize that the current board members have been exploring organizational collaboration opportunities with the Walla Walla Watershed Council and encourage those discussions to continue. Overall the council demonstrated inadequate progress on OWEB's merit criteria and is not recommended for funding.

Recommendations

Staff Recommendation to the Board: Do Not Fund

Staff Recommended Award:

Staff Conditions N/A