

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

PRESS RELEASE



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CTUIR to Get \$3.6M for Birch Creek Watershed Improvement

MISSION – The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) recently received notice it will get \$3.6 million from the National Fish and Wildlife Federation (NFWF) for improving the Birch Creek Watershed.

Rebecca Schwartz, CTUIR Department of Natural Resources Fisheries Habitat biologist, said improvements will consist of restoring fish habitat and a floodplain as well as decommissioning a 26-acre concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO).

The project site is upstream from its convergence with the Umatilla River and is a 60.5-acre parcel, including half a mile of Birch Creek. Located on private property, the site will be under a non-development and restoration easement on 943 acres, including water rights to be left instream in perpetuity among the landowner, Blue Mountain Land Trust and Bonneville Power Administration.

“Birch Creek is a primary tributary to the Umatilla River and provides important habitat for salmonids and other aquatic species. It produces roughly 50% of the Umatilla River Endangered Species Act-listed Mid-Columbia summer steelhead,” Schwartz said. “The Birch Creek Watershed has been part of the homeland for the three tribes of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation – Cayuse, Umatilla and Walla Walla – since time immemorial.”

Birch Creek provided a travel conduit for the tribes, and the watershed’s diverse resources were available for subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering. Over the years reductions in habitat quality and quantity have negatively impacted fish species, including the extirpation of spring Chinook and coho salmon.

Schwartz said floodplain restoration will consist of creating a primary channel, side channel habitat, floodplain benching, ponds, wetland complexes, large wood structures and a secondary high-flow bridge. This work is expected to address the lack of floodplain connectivity and habitat complexity for Endangered Species Act-listed steelhead and bull trout, Coho salmon, spring and fall Chinook salmon, Pacific lamprey and freshwater mussels.

“The area has become entrenched and largely disconnected from the floodplain from past land use practices, and the lack of large wood and riparian vegetation has led to the loss of appropriate spawning and rearing habitat for salmonids,” she said. “Full floodplain connectivity will reduce summer stream temperatures, improve rearing conditions for juvenile steelhead and native species and improve the overall survivability for CTUIR First Foods.”

The CTUIR will receive the funds this year, and the project will be implemented over multiple years due to its complexity and CAFO decommissioning requirements by the state. The secondary high flow bridge is anticipated to be installed in this spring, followed by the CAFO decommissioning in 2026 and the floodplain restoration in 2027.

“This is a tremendous feat, not only in securing the significant amount of restoration funding, but also in ensuring the continuation of the UmaBirch Project that will continue to improve conditions for First Foods and community values related to the natural resources of the Umatilla Basin,” said DNR Fisheries Program Manager Jeremiah Bonifer.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation is comprised of the Cayuse, Umatilla and Walla Walla Tribes, and formed under the Treaty of 1855 at the Walla Walla Valley, 12 Stat. 945. In 1949, the Tribes adopted a constitutional form of government to protect, preserve and enhance the reserved treaty rights guaranteed under federal law.

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