

# Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

## PRESS RELEASE



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Jan. 13, 2025

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### **CTUIR, Corps of Engineers sign pact to improve Mill Creek fish passage**

WALLA WALLA, Wash. – Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) officials held a signing on Friday, Jan. 10 at the Corps' Walla Walla District headquarters to honor a joint project to improve fish passage on Mill Creek.

The project will remove 7 miles of flood control structures the Corps installed in the creek from 1939 to 1943 to protect the City of Walla Walla. Those structures consisted of stream channelization with levees, 250 cross-channel small dams and a concrete channel through downtown Walla Walla.

“Over many years, flood control was the driving force of river management without consideration of the impacts to the natural environment. Public safety and human health are two key goals of the Corps of Engineers, but so is environmental protection and enhancement,” CTUIR Chairman Gary I. Burke said. “The CTUIR has worked with the Corps and other partners to ensure that environmental management and flood control can co-exist. We hope that this project, and others like it in the Walla Walla and Columbia basins will address the damage to fish habitat and passage we’ve seen over the last century understanding that this is a long-term process and continued restoration efforts will be needed in the Walla Walla Basin. It will continue to be important for projects such as this to be carried out to restore and protect the resources important to the exercise of CTUIR treaty rights.”

Burke added that it was fitting the ceremonial signing took place on Jan. 10, being that it was the five-year anniversary of the groundbreaking of the CTUIR’s South Fork Walla Walla Fish Hatchery.

Jerimiah Bonifer, CTUIR Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Fisheries Program manager, said the project is a significant step in improving fish passage in the Walla Walla Basin, which has suffered similar problems as the Umatilla Basin has such as over-appropriation of water and degraded habitat.

“The Walla Walla Basin has excellent habitat in the headwaters, however agricultural, industrial and residential development in the lower basin has severely degraded fish passage for salmon to the headwaters. This project is aimed at improving passage to give salmon populations the potential to flourish after decades of declines,” he said.

Because the Corps transferred the structures decades ago to Walla Walla County, the Corps requires approval from the county and specific sponsors of projects for federal funding, limiting its ability to fix problems the flood control construction created.

However, the CTUIR and Corps have worked to expand this authority. In 2023, the CTUIR proposed a pilot project under the Water Resources Development Act of 2020, requesting up to \$10 million in federal funds to notch 63 grade control sills along eight-tenths of a mile on Mill Creek. The Corps approved the plan on Aug. 29, 2024.

Mike Lambert, DNR Fisheries Habitat Program supervisor, said the notching entails constructing a river low-flow channel within each sill so juvenile and adult fish can move within the flood control channel.

“Mill Creek supports populations of...summer steelhead and bull trout, as well as reintroduced spring Chinook salmon and other culturally important First Foods fish species,” Lambert said. “These fish transit the Mill Creek Flood Control Project on their upstream migration to spawning habitat in the headwaters of Mill Creek and on their downstream migration to the Pacific Ocean and mainstem Columbia River habitats.”

Although ceremonial, the signing showcases the CTUIR’s cooperative efforts with the Corps to safeguard resources guaranteed under the Treaty of 1855 while protecting Walla Walla’s people and property.

“Today’s signing is a milestone in our collaboration as we formalize our commitment to improving fish passage along Mill Creek,” said Walla Walla District Commander Lt. Col. Kathryn Werback. “This partnership emphasizes the best of what we can achieve when we come together with a shared purpose. Mill Creek is home to several ESA- (Endangered Species Act) listed species and other species that represent more than just biodiversity, which we hope will thrive for generations to come.”

The joint effort also gives hope that other flood control structures impacting fish at places such as Nursery Reach in the Walla Walla River near Milton-Freewater, Oregon, have an opportunity for funding and completion.

*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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Caption1: Lt. Col. Kathryn Werback, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) Walla Walla District commander, and Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) Chairman Gary I. Burke sign an agreement for a pilot project between the Corps and CTUIR to improve fish passage on Mill Creek in Walla Walla, Washington. The pact was signed on Friday, Jan. 10 at the Walla Walla District headquarters. CTUIR

Caption2: Lt. Col. Kathryn Werback, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) Walla Walla District commander, and Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) Chairman Gary I. Burke hold a signed agreement between the Corps and CTUIR to improve fish passage on Mill Creek in Walla Walla, Washington. The ceremonial signing was held Friday, Jan. at the Corps’ Walla Walla offices. CTUIR

Caption3: The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) Board of Trustees, CTUIR Department of Natural Resources staff and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) Walla Walla District gather for a photo on Friday, Jan. 10 at the Corps Walla Walla headquarters after a pact between the CTUIR and Corps was signed to improve fish passage on Mill Creek in Walla Walla, Washington. CTUIR