

Watershed Council talks goals, future at annual banquet

By Kevin Winter Lake County Examiner
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Autumn Muir, uplands coordinator for the Lake County Umbrella Watershed Council, thanks Chuck Kelley and names him the landowner of the year at the org award banquet.

Kevin Winter/Lake County Examiner

Lake County Umbrella Watershed Council (LCUWC) recently held its annual award and update ceremony to discuss progress on projects and what the future entails for LCUWC and projects across the region. The organization also unveiled its 2021 annual report.

Colleen Withers, fiscal administrator for LCUWC, spoke about how the different agencies and groups work together to fund projects and to work on projects together. Withers said wildfires do not respect property boundaries and neither should forest management projects. She noted that most of the funding for projects comes from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB), which receives most of its funding through Oregon Lottery, with increases coming from Federal funding sources, especially with the federal government passing a number of bills which include additional funding for wildfire management projects.

Brandi Neider, stream and riparian coordinator for LCUWC, said the past few years have been extremely dry.

"There is a lot of interest in completing projects that improve water quality and water availability — not only for farmers, but for wildlife as well," said Neider.

One of the highlights of 2021 which Neider emphasized was the Bureau of Reclamation being funded for a new Upper Chewaucan Assessment. The previous assessment of the upper Chewaucan River is over 15 years old. One of the reasons LCUWC and Neider applied for funding were the changes that have impacted the upper Chewaucan River — in the mountains above Paisley — over the past couple of decades, including a number of large and mega wildfires.

"The upper Chewaucan assessment will help guide us for future projects in that basin and what is feasible and what needs to be done now. The assessment will act as a roadmap and will be a way for us to approach funders for projects within the upper Chewaucan basin," said Neider in an earlier interview.

She is excited about work continuing on Muddy Creek and how it will impact fish habitat in the greater Goose Lake Valley. Muddy Creek feeds into Junipers Reservoir in Junipers RV Resort west of Lakeview and after it leaves the reservoir it makes its way toward Goose Lake. Ever since the reservoir was built decades ago it split Muddy Creek for fish passage and fish were not able to make it beyond Junipers Reservoir. In 2021, LCUWC and property owner John Shine were able to complete the first phase of the project and construct fish bypass channels.

"The next step in 2022 is to create the connection between the fish passage channels and to once again connect the two sections of Muddy Creek," said Neider.

She highlighted this project as one of the ways LCUWC works with landowners to upgrade their properties, support fish habitat, and provide irrigation and water efficiencies in one fell swoop.

LCUWC and Neider are working on finishing work along Deep Creek and its water diversions. These diversions were built years ago by farmers and ranchers to divert water from Deep Creek to feed their operations. Neider has been working on a multi-year project to improve the efficiency of the diversions so farmers and ranchers can still get their water, while at the same time providing a way for fish to travel from the lakes of the Warner Valley upstream. One of the fish is the Warner Sucker, a federally listed threatened species. The improvements to the water diversions will allow the Warner Sucker to travel upstream during times of low water in the lakes that it calls home as the Warner Sucker is a poor jumper it had difficulty moving above the water diversions. Neider said the goal is to complete work in late 2022 and then begin monitoring the impacts; work will then focus on Honey Creek in the Plush area.

Autumn Muir, uplands coordinator for LCUWC, spoke about what is moving forward for her and how 2021 went for her projects.

"I am hoping to hear good news in July 2022 when OWEB will be deciding on what projects to fund including the six-year, \$12 million Focused Investment Partnership (FIP) which will allow us to work on a landscape scale restoration," said Muir.

This is a project Muir and LCUWC have been working on for a number of years, but due to delays at OWEB caused by budgetary constraints and wildfires impacting the areas where the FIP would occur, Muir was forced to redo the maps of the FIP area and the scope of work. If awarded the FIP would be one of the largest landscape restoration projects in Lake County.

"We are behind the curve and I am hoping to do more, increase the pace and try to catch up," said Muir. "We need to work on making the landscape more resilient to wildfires."

One project that will begin is a technical assistance grant in the South Warner area, areas south of Adel to the Oregon/California border.

This would be similar to the Thompson Creek technical assistance grant in that it would allow LCUWC and its partners to map, analyze, conduct outreach to property owners and plan how to move forward on forest management health.

Neider thanked Don Alonso as the landowner of the year and Cassie Roeder as the partner of the year. Muir thanked Chuck Kelly as the landowner of the year and Amy Markus as the partner of the year.

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