

# Ecosystem Workforce Program

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## MOBILIZING HUMAN RESOURCES FOR WATERSHED RESTORATION

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In Oregon, community-based organizations have become major agents of watershed restoration. The most common of these organizations are watershed councils, which began to emerge in the mid-1990s as the State of Oregon promoted voluntary local approaches to resolving conflict, restoring watershed health, and recovering endangered salmon. Because these nongovernmental organizations represent a significantly different approach to watershed management from traditional government management, regulatory, and extension models, it is important to understand how they mobilize human resources to manage themselves and carry out restoration work. How watershed councils mobilize resources greatly affects the scope and scale of restoration efforts in Oregon. This briefing paper summarizes the findings from a study that explores how watershed councils have built the organizational capacity and human resources necessary to manage themselves and implement watershed restoration.

### Approach

We conducted in-depth, open-ended telephone interviews with the coordinators of watershed councils that completed the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) support grant application for the 2009–11 biennium. We asked sixty-four council coordinators to participate in interviews and ultimately interviewed fifty-two (81 percent) during the summer of 2009. We asked council coordinators to discuss their council's use of staff, contractors, and in-kind assistance to manage the council and develop and implement restoration projects.

### Findings

In the last decade, watershed councils have brought together communities, landowners, and state and federal agencies to reach agreement and then develop and implement restoration activities. Two of the major activities for which councils need to mobilize human resources are council management and watershed restoration projects. Council management can include the development of funding opportunities; maintenance of positive working

relationships with natural resource agencies, community groups, stakeholders, agencies, and interested citizens; clerical work; preparing newsletters and reports; outreach; and education. Restoration may require activities such as watershed condition assessment, surveying and engineering, riparian tree planting, culvert replacements, fish habitat creation, and irrigation improvements.

To organize their operations and accomplish restoration projects, watershed councils mobilize three types of human resources: in-house staffing, contracting, and in-kind assistance. Most councils in this study employed a council coordinator as well as other staff members for administrative and programmatic needs such as education, fiscal administration, landowner outreach, project management, and general administrative assistance. In addition, some staff members played a role in restoration project management, including overseeing the implementation of restoration projects. In a few cases, watershed councils employed work crews that implemented restoration projects. But it was far more common for councils to use contractors to implement restoration projects.



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Contracting was an especially important component of organizational capacity for councils that only had a single employee. Contractors played the greatest role in restoration project design and implementation, where they performed work on a project-by-project basis. Councils frequently contracted for all kinds of restoration activities ranging from design assistance to labor-intensive planting. The councils contracted for virtually all activities requiring heavy equipment and skilled operators.

In addition to employment and contracting, watershed councils were mobilizing in-kind assistance—that is, resources that watershed councils secure without payment from local, state, and federal agencies, landowners, for-profit and nonprofit organizations, and volunteers. In-kind assistance ranged from technical assistance (e.g., special analysis, permitting, project design) to organizational assistance (e.g., office and meeting space, internet and e-mail service) to assistance with restoration projects (e.g., tree planting) and donation of materials (e.g., plants for riparian planting projects, large woody debris). In-kind assistance has been a substantial resource that has helped increase the complexity and scale of their council activities.

A council's fiscal agents determined its contracting policies. Those councils that had soil and water conservation districts or other government entities as fiscal agents followed the state procurement processes. Councils acting as their own fiscal agents or with nongovernmental fiscal agents developed their own procurement processes,

which were often less formal and more flexible than government procedures. Councils evaluated contractors on a wide variety of criteria (e.g., experience, work quality, cost, past experience with the council, references, availability, and location). When feasible, councils hired local contractors, but when projects were too specialized for local contractors, they hired nonlocal firms with the appropriate skills and resources.

## Conclusion

The majority of funding for watershed restoration has come from state and federal sources over the past fifteen years. Watershed councils and other community-based nongovernmental organizations have captured much of this money and used it to facilitate the implementation of restoration projects on private land. Watershed councils have mobilized human resources in ways that reflect their local circumstances. Some councils adopted the employment and contracting regulations of their local government partners, whereas others have created their own flexible and fluid system for hiring staff members, partnering for in-kind assistance, and selecting and managing contractors.

## More information

The complete study can be found in the EWP Working Paper #22, "Mobilizing Human Resources for Watershed Restoration," which is available on the web at [ewp.uoregon.edu](http://ewp.uoregon.edu).