

Flyline

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Conservation Corner

New Name, New Paradigm

Two Oregon conservation groups joined forces late last year to leverage their strengths to save our watersheds. More than a merger, Oregon Trout and Oregon Water Trust have a plan to change the way our rivers and streams are restored. **Joe Whitworth**, Executive Director of Oregon Trout, said at the February FCO meeting, "Restoration today is basically a retrofit on existing regulations." But their organization's plans are far from retro. And their new name, **The Freshwater Trust**, reflects the heart of one of their most ambitious missions. The program is called Streambank, and it provides a web-based tool that greatly increases the efficiency of permitting and obtaining grants for stream restoration on private lands.

Currently, landowners and local restoration professionals traverse a surreptitious route through regulations and government reviews, multiple grant applications, deadlines, and reports. The system is fraught with delays, ambiguities, and gaps in funding. Pilot work with Streambank (17 projects in 2008) has shown that process delays can be reduced by as much as 75%, without compromising on the quality of the project's design and implementation on-the-ground. Landowners can be guided to develop a restoration plan that will provide real results in terms of habitat

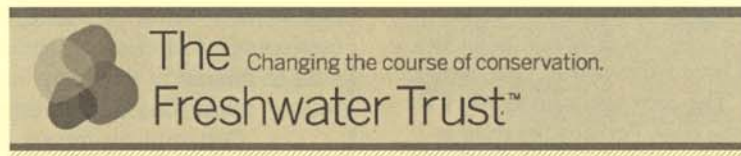
enhancement. According to Brett Brownscombe, Conservation Director for The Freshwater Trust, the program "takes the actions that are known to have low to medium-risk but high reward to the watershed." StreamBank can "run funding and permits through a one-stop shop." Lower risk actions include riparian planting of trees, removal of invasive species, and exclusion of livestock from streams. Medium risk projects provide high value to fish and other aquatic life by affecting the structure and function of streams. Placement of large wood instream, reconnecting side channels, and removal of fish passage barriers are scientifically supported as work with high ecological value yet they pose greater than minimal

risk to stream health. If these projects are not carefully engineered, they can cause harm to streams by undesirably redirecting flow, destabilizing banks, or increasing erosion and

sedimentation. Poorly designed projects can also threaten local landowners' property. This type of work requires careful study and consultation from experts before proceeding, and StreamBank provides a mechanism for efficient funding for the design work.

Streambank will not tackle what Brownscombe considers high risk, complex projects such as re-channeling streams to their historic meanders. "Addressing regulatory reluctance to increase risk tolerance needs to proceed carefully," he says, "so these projects proceed separate from StreamBank for the

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time being." Since StreamBank is designed to address the majority of the most common restoration projects by improving efficiency, the tool has the capability of freeing up agency staff resources to deal with the more complex projects. When asked how the expertise of the Oregon Water Trust will help with projects like Streambank, Brownscombe said that the newly merged organization is now positioned with tools that "offer the whole fix." If a landowner who wants to improve habitat health is in an area where flow restoration is needed, The Freshwater Trust will work with the landowner to see if they are interested in the added benefit of increasing stream flow. Conversely, landowners who begin with an interest in flow may increase the benefit of their efforts by addressing habitat restoration.

Certainly, awareness and partnerships created by Streambank have the possibility of marrying the key components of riparian restoration, water quality enhancement, and support of native species. But the greatest benefit may be the fact that a new tool is available for landowners in all corners of Oregon to greatly improve the efficiency of stream restoration. And this option comes at a critical time. Oregon streams are warming at an alarming rate. Pressure on our water resources are increasing as our population grows, and climate change is affecting snow pack and water flow. As Mr. Whitworth told us last month, his organization has a tall order they hope to fill: "Make all Oregon watersheds fully support healthy aquatic life."

~Keith and Lisa Hansen