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CASEY CAMPBELL | GAZETTE-TIMES

Lincoln Middle School students Rose Goldberg, left, and Elisia Rose plant a tree along the bank of Blair Creek as part of an environmentally-themed learning experience on Friday.

Students dig in to help Blair Creek

BY ALEX PAUL
GAZETTE-TIMES REPORTER

Caitlyn Teppler-Horne, 11, Anna Hughes, 13, and Anna Wills, 13, reached down and dragged handfuls of soggy soil out of a hole they were digging Friday afternoon near Blair Creek southwest of Philomath.

The girls planted an Oregon ash. They were careful to make sure its awkwardly shaped roots were pointed downward before they began to tamp the muddy soil.

As Lincoln Middle School students, the girls are used to taking part in outdoor projects as part of their school's environmentally themed learning experience. About 50 students, plus teachers and adults representing several stakeholder organizations, worked together to culminate several months of a riparian zone restoration project.

"It's important that the roots go downward," explained Anna Hughes. "It's also important that when we put the dirt back, there aren't air holes around the root."

Caitlyn said it was "cool to be able to help the landowner."

Nearby, Rose Goldberg, 12, and Elisia Rose, 11, said the project is intended to help reduce erosion that dumps sediment into the 3-foot-wide Blair Creek. The girls planted a red alder and said it was chosen because it grows well in wet areas.

"It will also give off good nutrients into the river," Elisia said.

Lincoln Middle School instructors Janice Rosenberg and Patti Ball said the students began planning the project several months ago with guidance and financial support from the Marys River Watershed Council, the Benton Soil and Water Conservation District, the

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Oregon Trout/Healthy Waters Institute and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Karen Fleck-Harding of the watershed council has been instrumental in every stage of the project, Rosenberg said.

"We actually started the Blair Creek project by replacing an Oregon Department of Transportation culvert that had a large drop with a fish-friendly unit," Fleck-Harding said. "Then, neighbors became interested in doing upstream work and Oregon Trout funded two more culverts and a landowner chose to take out another culvert."

Students have been involved from early on, Rosenberg said. They tested water quality, set up and evaluated a fish trap, studied baseline data and research and selected the types of shrubs and trees best suited in each of the riparian zones near the creek.

The students mapped out the zones and placed flags where the shrubs and trees were to be planted. There were 750 shrubs and 150 trees, representing more than 10 species including western red cedar, white oak, ash, maple and alder.

"We were impressed that the students already had a good knowledge base," Fleck-Harding said. "We told them this was their chance to use that knowledge on the ground."

The students were responsible for making presentations to the landowners, Rosenberg said. Information included the width of the proposed riparian area and which trees and shrubs should be considered for each area that was mapped out by the students.

Students also studied salmonids and raised them in their classrooms.

The two-acre site had been cleared several years ago and used as a baseball diamond by a previous landowner's family. The students' activities were videotaped by Freshwater Illustrated. The OSU Folk Club provided funds to buy rubber boots.

"The kids will come back and will monitor the site over time," Fleck-Harding said. "They will check the area for water quality and will do a mortality survey to see how many trees lived."

Rosenberg said the project had many learning opportunities, including improving math and writing skills. Students will write an article about the project to be published in Healthy Water magazine.

"All in all, it has been an amazing community collaboration," Rosenberg said.