

## **Fir Mountain Ranch Wetland Rehabilitation Project The Owner's Perspective**

I was very fortunate in the wetland restoration project to have the extremely capable and enjoyable advice and help of two really fine people: Chris Wohlers, of Wohlers Environmental Services in Tigard, Oregon and Lon Mikkelsen of Inter-Fluve in Hood River. Without the help of Chris, and Lon and all his associates at Inter-Fluve, this project could never have been completed, much less visualized.

The nuts-and-bolts details of how the work was actually accomplished are well described in other reports in this Section. In this short paper, I will just present some brief thoughts about the project from my standpoint. My role was merely to get the ball rolling in terms of visualizing a basic concept. But I relied completely on Chris to shepherd the water rights matters through the appropriate State agencies, and on Lon to actually design and manage the reconstruction project, as well as helping me consult and communicate with twelve different agencies whose approval we needed to obtain before the first shovel full of dirt could be moved.

Yes, twelve agencies! These were:

Local (2): Hood River Valley Watershed Association,  
Hood River County Planning Dep't.

State (5): Oregon State Departments of Forestry, Fish and Wildlife, Lands, Ecology  
and last, but certainly not least, Water Resources

Federal (4): USDA U.S. Forest Service, USDI BLM, US Army Corps. Of Engineers  
and the Environmental Protection Agency

Native Nations (1): Confederated Tribes of the Lower Columbia

A lot of people had a say in it, but we patiently worked our way through it! It was the reputations of Lon and Chris that allowed the process to proceed more or less smoothly over the three years we worked on getting the permits in order. I was able to work quite well with all the representatives of these agencies involved, but beyond the forestry folks, Lon's reputation really carried a lot of weight in allowing the State and Federal agencies to cooperatively work with us to allow the project to go forward.

My initial objective in undertaking the restoration work was very simple, or so I thought at the time. I wanted to repair what I perceived as a very damaged piece of ground. The area was a mess. Where the pond is now, there was a criss-crossing network of concrete ditches that were in extreme disrepair. There was a couple of old telephone poles that had carried power for a pump. There was a large pothole filled with water, and the entire area had been trampled into a mucky, hardened mass of goo by a herd of horses that roamed around the property.

Because the water itself was a prime component of the system, I knew from the outset that a complex permitting process was ahead. The care and management of water and aquatic systems drives the permitting process in most land management activities in the

State, specifically with regard to the anadromous fisheries populations, for example steelhead and salmon that migrate up and down the Columbia River.

The surface water rights that came with the property allowed some irrigation, which had been obviously used in some fashion. That was obvious from the power poles that were in the vicinity. I set about changing the water rights from irrigation, and domestic use to fire control, wildlife habitat and recreation uses. This administrative change took several years to accomplish, and progressed on a parallel track with the rehabilitation work, which also had a multi-year permit track.

So I viewed my role primarily as one of helping with the paperwork and permits. That was a challenge, but the rewards were well worth it, as you can see from the photos in the galleries of this Section. As for the actual design of the project, Lon described his design challenges this way:

“The real challenge was to create and restore a landscape using very large heavy equipment with out leaving a trace that we were ever there - immediately after the work was completed. We also needed to design a natural system by interpreting the data we collected - understanding what used to be here before disturbance, how it was disturbed and using that information as an analog for design.”

Inter-Fluve did a great job. All people from every Agency involved in the project worked well together. I really was struck by the strong realization that throughout the process, the effort that we all put into staying in constant communication and not trying to dodge or finesse anything really paid off in the wonderful results that were achieved.

What I believe is most important for future owners of the property to understand about this little gem of an ecosystem can be best summed up in Lon's words:

“The pond and wetland complex is its own ecosystem. Its restoration was based on self-sufficiency. Much effort was taken to maintain the balance of water and landscape. All the past influences of human use were removed and a natural system was set back in motion. It is important to understand that natural systems are never static. They live, breath and react to changes in weather – years that see very little rain and moister and years that can be very wet. We have to resist the temptations to manipulate nature based on a very short time period. Most of all, it is important and unique place where man can experience and interact with nature - as it was thousands of years ago.”