

Restoring Juvenile Habitat: Oxbow Conservation Area

[music]

Brian: The Middle Fork John Day River is just an incredible river to be able to work on and help restore.

Mark: There's been so much disturbance in this entire watershed through ranching, logging, historic railroads, dredge mining, that the system is really out of balance. This area originally was a ranch-under private ownership and in the late 1930s, early '40s, a dredge mining company leased the ground for gold mining. In that process of the dredging, they pretty much completely removed the original channel structure, and what was left was the straightened channel through this stretch of the valley.

Brian: We realized that this dredged area was really never going to recover just through passive protection. The Confederated Tribe of the Warm Springs put a team together of folks, and we started really investing heavily into studying the site, understanding what needed to be done, talking about options. Over time, it's built into this large project. So we turned to the Bureau of Reclamation, and they started helping us.

[music]

Mike: And so what we're doing is trying to recreate the natural riffle-pool, glide features that you would get in a natural channel that the different fish at different life stages utilize.

[water]

And so we remeandered the river, lengthened by over 650 feet and added the complexity that a natural channel provides.

Mark: The total project area is about 6500 feet and it's a total rebuild of the stream channel, so it's a huge amount of earth moving and impact to the ground. A lot of other projects, we try not to do such a heavy-handed approach. But in this case, we really had to do a major project to get it out of that dredge mined channel.

Brian: You know, we've read all the papers, we've looked at other projects, we've gone out there and we know what fish like. They like large wood structures, they like complexity in the channel.

Mark: The large wood provides habitat for juveniles. It also helps to control erosion of the banks temporarily until the vegetation that's planted out here has time to take root. The Middle Fork is a little bit interesting in that these torrent sedge grow in clumps.

Mike: It inhabits this area of the John Day River and it's extremely hardy. It creates a really big ball, a couple of feet around, a big root mass ball, and it's really hard to destruct. We're able to harvest it and place it where we'd like to. What it does is provide instant vegetation which gives us a lot of things that we're looking for, not only that instant habitat benefit, but also that instant erosion control.

[music]

Brian: It's slowly getting there to becoming a living, breathing stream. It's great to see that the salmon are choosing to spawn in it right off the bat with it less than a month old.