Just say "YEP" to Teens Restoring Streambanks in Anchorage, Alaska

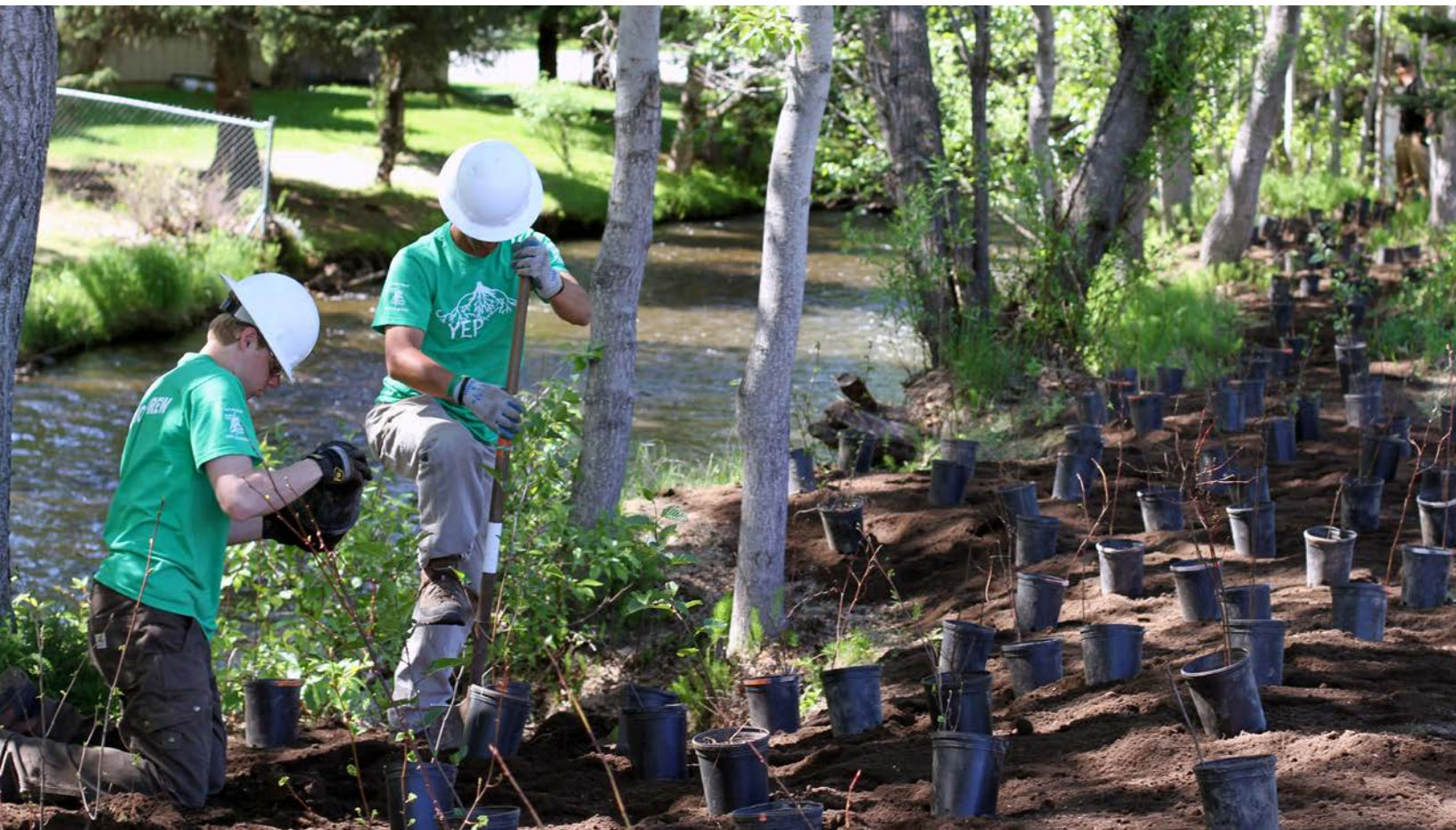
Alaska teens contributed to ongoing habitat improvement efforts within the Chester Creek watershed in Anchorage by giving two sections of the creek's riparian zone a major makeover this past June. Although riparian habitat makes up a relatively small percentage of a watershed's total land area, it provides critical fish and wildlife habitat, areas of ground water recharge, natural flood and erosion control, and water quality protection. Chester Creek provides habitat for salmon, trout, and char, and creekside trails and greenbelts provide movement corridors for native wildlife like moose.

In 2009, a variety of partners (including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Anchorage Field Office) completed a multi-million dollar project at the mouth of Chester Creek to restore its connection to Cook Inlet and allow migrating salmon free passage upstream. However, there is still much work to be done: both Chester Creek and Westchester Lagoon are included on Alaska's List of Impaired Waterbodies due to high fecal coliform bacteria levels and well over a third of the culverts in its watershed are classified as barriers to fish passage. Other issues include (but aren't limited to) runoff and invasive riparian plants like reed canary grass and European bird cherry.

One of 26 different creeks in the Anchorage Bowl, Chester Creek flows west from its headwaters in the Chugach Mountains through the heart of Anchorage and into the Knik Arm of Cook Inlet via Westchester Lagoon. Over 65,000 Anchorage residents live within its 27 square mile watershed (just shy of half the size of Washington, D.C.).

Hired as part of the Anchorage Park Foundation's "Youth Employment in Parks" (**YEP**) program, teens spent an entire week working alongside local habitat restoration experts to plant hundreds of native trees and shrubs along Chester Creek where it flows through Valley of the Moon Park (*below*). They also added topsoil

Below: *YEP crews planted hundreds of native trees and shrubs along Chester Creek where it flows through Valley of the Moon Park near downtown Anchorage.* Katrina Mueller/USFWS



and reseeded the bank near the outlet of Westchester Lagoon with native grasses where efforts to control reed canary grass have been ongoing (pictured below).

These activities align with YEP's goal to "positively engage a new generation of diverse youth leaders with conservation and the Anchorage community through meaningful training, employment, and outdoor recreation." The project also supported the Service's mission of working with others to conserve fish, wildlife, and their habitats, as well as one of the agency's national priorities: connecting people with nature.

In fact, APF received Secretary Salazar's national Partners in Conservation Award in 2010 for the YEP Program. These types of projects provide the perfect framework for participating teens to learn about local creeks, fisheries, water quality, and habitat restoration techniques. They also contribute significantly to the collective, ongoing effort to improve habitat quality and connectivity within the watershed.

Since the inception of YEP in 2007, the Service has provided funding and staff time on an annual basis to support a week-long YEP habitat restoration project targeting Anchorage creeks. The week-long 2013 Chester Creek project (including the cost of the crew, contractor, and materials) was supported by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game Cost Share Program agreement with the Service, and the Service's Coastal Program and Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. The Service's contribution to the 2013 Chester Creek project was also matched dollar for dollar by APF.

A major fish passage restoration project at the creek's mouth now allows passage of salmon into the watershed.

K.Mueller/USFWS

Hard work brings a smile from a teen employed by YEP (left) during restoration activities along Westchester Lagoon's shoreline. For many, this is their first job.