

Where the Forest Meets the River

A partnership to restore riparian forest habitat at Tualatin River National Wildlife Refuge

This winter marks the next step and biggest challenge in restoring 21 acres of riparian forest along the Tualatin River. A total of 19,550 native shrubs and trees will be planted between now and late March on the Refuge's Dennis parcel—at the site of the old Refuge Headquarters off Roy Rogers Road. Of that total, nearly 6,400 native plants will be installed by volunteers and another 4,300 by Refuge staff. The remaining 8,850 will be planted by contractors. Needless to say, we need your help, but let's look at the history of the project first.

Five years ago, the Refuge was contacted by the Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District to see if the Refuge had any land base to qualify for their "Vegetated Buffer Areas for Conservation and Commerce" program—VEGBACC for short. VEGBACC is a landowner incentive and partnership program to plant native trees and shrubs to create a natural buffer along streams and rivers. The Refuge had the perfect site on the Dennis parcel, where much of the land had already been restored to seasonal and forested wetlands, upland woodland, and oak savannah. The remaining acreage left to be restored was situated along the river, much of which had been previously logged prior to refuge acquiring the land. The Refuge knew this opportunity would benefit the Tualatin River, native wildlife and their habitats.

Here's how:

Thirsty trees and shrubs of riparian forest need the river to survive, but the river needs the forest just as much. Wildlife in both habitats reap the benefits of this two-way relationship. The shade of a healthy riparian forest cools the water and its root systems help stabilize the river banks and prevent erosion. When the river tops its banks during a flood, it deposits nutrient-rich sediment on the riverbank, feeding the plants of the riparian forest. Vegetation that dies and falls into the water adds nutrients to the river and creates habitat—shelter and housing—for a remarkable variety of wildlife, from frogs, fish and turtles to tiny snails and insect larvae. This healthy relationship provides cool, clean water for aquatic animals to survive, as well as healthy forest habitat for migratory songbirds and other forest dwellers.

With this natural match, the Refuge, the Friends (through the Restoration Committee), and the Tualatin Soil and Water Conservation District entered into a three-way agreement to restore the 21 acres. The Refuge would be responsible for preparing the site, planting native grass, and planting trees. The District would provide all of the native plant stock, (native grass seed and nearly 20,000 trees and shrubs), as well as help coordinate the long-term maintenance of the site. The Friends agreed to provide volunteers to plant shrubs and trees, as well as fund half of the long-term maintenance contract—\$22,000 over the next 5 years.

Since 2005, the Refuge has successfully cleared all 21 acres of invasive species such as Himalayan blackberry and Canada thistle, and we have planted and established the site with native grasses.

Now we are ready to plant all of those trees and shrubs. We are fortunate to have so many partners participating in addition to the Refuge, the Friends, and the District. REI is sending out volunteer work crews. Tualatin Riverkeepers are loaning tools from their Restoration Tool Bank. Friends of Trees have trained some Refuge crew leaders and will help with some of the plantings. Clean Water Services is providing additional plant material and storage for the plant stock prior to getting them in the ground. Local schools and scout troops are lending a hand.

Now we need your help at the planting parties scheduled from late January through the end of March. For details, see the schedule www.fws.gov/tualatinriver/getinvolved or check out the calendar on the Friends website at www.friendsoftualatinrefuge.org.

Come out, have fun, and be part of the largest volunteer led restoration project on the Refuge to date.