DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY
State of Washington

Transforming Watersheds

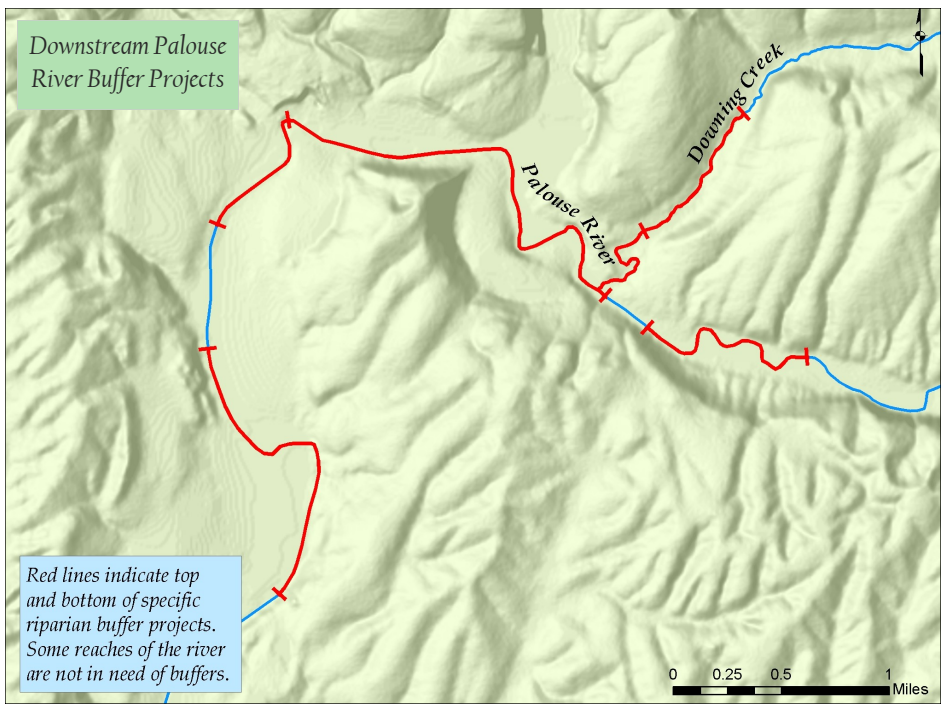
Palouse River - Whitman County

The Place

The Palouse River is the main artery of the great Palouse grasslands of eastern Washington. Since the last of the Missoula floods 12,000 years ago, the prevailing winds have carried soils eastward and formed the productive rolling hills of the Palouse. All the while, the river has worked to carry some of that soil back west. The river originates in the Idaho mountains and picks up the highly erodible soils along its journey, eventually emptying into the Snake River in southeast Washington. The river travels through mixed conifer forests, beautiful basalt-rimmed Ponderosa Pine canyons, and the Desert Scablands. The river's course is highlighted by the 180 foot Palouse Falls just a few miles before it meets the Snake River. The falls block the migration of salmon and steelhead, but this did not diminish the river's historic importance to native American tribes or pioneer farmers. Their descendants also have the same special connection to the Palouse and the great bounty it provides.

The Effort

Farms on the Palouse produce millions of bushels of wheat and barley annually. Cattle production is also important. In fact, the Palouse region has been an economic engine for our state for well over a century. But, recently it became clear the river needed help. It was failing state water quality standards for bacteria, temperature, dissolved oxygen, pH, and a variety of different toxic chemicals, making it one of the more polluted water bodies in the state. In 2006, The Palouse-Rock Lake Conservation District responded by creating a riparian buffer program to help move farming off the banks. Several landowners have signed-up. Using a variety of different funding sources including Ecology grants and USDA cost-share programs, they have initiated several river restoration projects. These projects on the Palouse River have included more than 16 miles of river protected from the impacts of cattle grazing and tillage. Over 100,000 trees and shrubs have been planted. This is just a fraction of the total stream restoration work completed throughout the entire conservation district. Many more projects have been installed on tributaries.



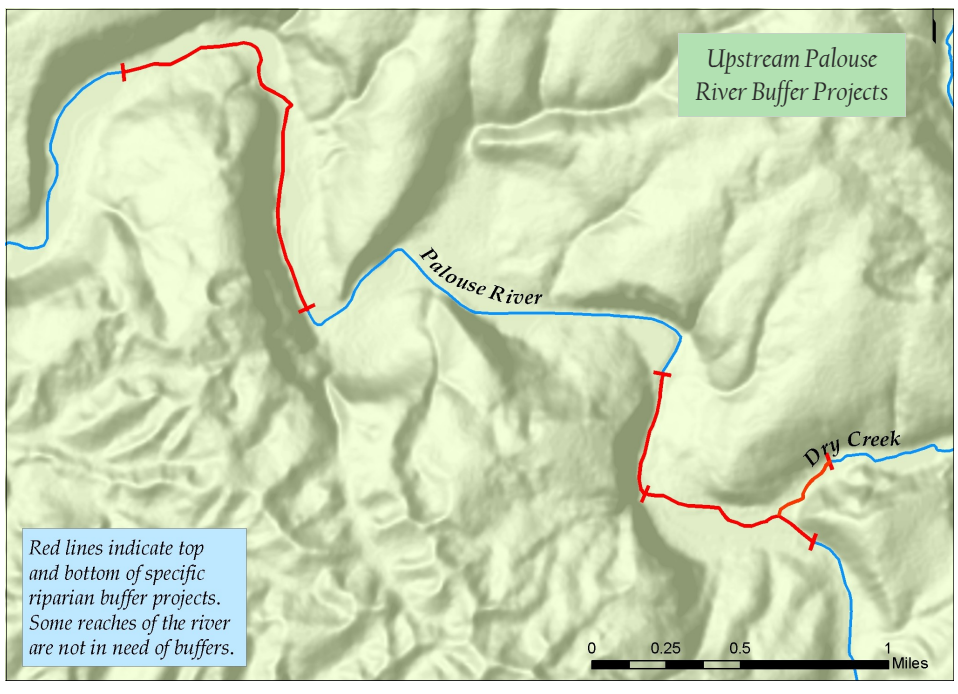
The Results

In the last three years, the conservation district has seen a difference in the river. Dan Harwood of the conservation district points to signs of the restoration activities already visible along the banks of the Palouse. The native trees and shrubs planted are starting to grow and stabilize and the stream channel and some of the exposed, eroding banks are now covered in grass. The landowners can also see the changes and are proud of the steps they have taken. At 90 years old, one landowner remembers how different the river looked as a child. She says she is participating in restoration work "for the grandchildren." She wants them to be able to enjoy a river with clean water and trees along the banks like she did in her youth. She is hopeful this is the legacy all families on the Palouse will leave for future generations.

Installing livestock exclusion fencing on a hill above the Palouse

The Future

The future for the Palouse River is looking brighter every day. Many more miles of stream in the area can benefit from restoration activities and the Palouse-Rock Lake Conservation District is on it. They've signed up more landowners in their buffer program. In addition, they launched one of the more robust conservation tillage programs in the state. They worked with producers in the region to develop strategies to promote direct seed, a type of tillage that nearly eliminates erosion. One strategy was to create a mentor program, where an experienced direct seeder is paired with a producer just starting.



Washington Conservation Corp

The Washington Conservation Corp (WCC) crews are a critical component of the water quality success on the Palouse River. Crews are funded by Washington State in partnership with federal AmeriCorps dollars. The supervisor and the five crew members between 18 – 24 provide much of the labor for restoration projects. The crew members receive wages for building fence and planting trees. At the same time they gain valuable work experience. Plus, at the end of their year of service, they receive a college scholarship.

WCC crew members planting pine trees on the Palouse

The People

Landowners installing riparian BMPs-
David Morgan; Dennis White; Louis and Joyce Gaiser; Read Smith; John Schlomer; Eric Hughes.

Technical and financial assistance provided by-
Palouse-Rock Lake Conservation District (PRLCD); WA Fish & Wildlife; Southeast District Engineer; USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service; and USDA Farm Service Agency.

Funding for the Palouse River projects provided by-
Washington Conservation Commission (WCC); WA Dept. of Ecology; USDA Farm Service Agency; and the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

A special thanks to the PRLCD Board of Supervisors for the vision, guidance, and support of clean water activities. They are leaders on the Palouse for promoting sustainable agricultural practices.

For additional information, please contact Chad Atkins at the Dept. of Ecology 509-329-3499 or Dan Harwood at the PRLCD 509-648-3680.

If you need this information in an alternate format, contact us at 509-329-3436. If you are a person with a speech or hearing impairment, call 711 or 800-833-6388 for TTY.
Ecology Publication No. 10-10-039, July 2010