



NETWORK of OREGON

WATERSHED COUNCILS

September 4th, 2020

Dear Members of the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board,

Thank you for the opportunity to share comments on the social, economic and logistical effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as they pertain to Watershed Councils, and the ways councils have responded and adapted.

This past April, as one of the Oregon Conservation Partners (OrCP), NOWC conducted a survey across Watershed Councils to gauge the many ways the pandemic affects our member organizations. The survey data clearly showed that Watershed Councils had been impacted by the challenges imposed by social distancing requirements, reduced access to fieldwork sites and outreach venues, slow-downs in permitting and other processes, etc. For these reasons, the work has often taken longer and/or costs more than originally planned. In August, the NOWC Board regional representatives reached out to each council, asking for an update so that we can better understand what has changed (for better and for worse), their emerging strategies, and what is working/not working.

In general, Watershed Councils are resourceful and resilient. Many have pivoted their community engagement and outreach efforts online, posting interactive content such as live-stream events and citizen science activities to their social media sites, often with large increases in participation across demographics and geographic regions. The Columbia Slough Watershed Council held a successful [virtual fundraising gala](#). The Long Tom Watershed Council has shifted their public meetings to webinars, which allows for recording and access at any time.

The Calpooia Watershed Council, has produced [video lessons](#) from habitat restoration sites, including wildlife tracking, fire ecology and seed design. Across councils, it is likely that many of these



strategies will remain in place after the pandemic ends.

Councils have made various changes to volunteer events -- some have been cancelled because they could no longer share tools or otherwise provide a safe environment. Some, such as Johnson Creek Watershed Council, were able to change their approach by designating distanced meet sites for small groups of volunteers for their [annual creek cleanup](#). Scapoose Bay Watershed Council was able to adapt their annual plant sale through pre-orders and contactless pick-up locations.

Most monitoring and restoration projects have been impacted by evolving requirements for PPE, group size and social distancing. Councils have found work-arounds by rotating smaller field crews, utilizing personal vehicles and remote meetings with partners and landowners. The Coos Watershed Association found that some monitoring projects that normally require close contact were possible through the use of bluetooth which allowed for more space between staff.

Many councils have found outreach to new landowners, volunteers and potential new board members difficult, which has delayed project plans. Rural areas with limited broadband access have especially experienced difficulties connecting with landowners. Socially distanced outdoor meetings have been great compromises during the nice weather but many councils will need to shift to different strategies over the coming winter.



Councils have been revising their monthly and annual budgets as spring and summer fundraisers were cancelled and agency/foundation funding has decreased. Some projects have been postponed as matching funds have vanished. Some staff have already been laid off as programs have shifted or been curtailed, with more anticipated as secured funding is spent down. The anticipated lull in funding may trigger a reduction in both council productivity and council capacity into the next biennium, and for this reason many councils are reviewing their missions and strategic plans to proactively streamline their efforts.

Finally, we are all concerned about our stamina for the current “normal”, thinking of ways we can boost our morale and effectively collaborate across distance and logistical barriers. We believe that enhancing communication within and across our regions, building cohorts, will be essential to our surviving and thriving through these challenges.

We have appreciated OWEB’s frequent and transparent communication regarding the fluctuations in funding and your navigation through this economic downturn with an eye towards NOWC members’ ability to persist. As OWEB budget plans change and adapt, we continue to advocate for full funding for capacity grants in the 2021-2023 biennium, and, if possible, prioritizing the re-funding of monitoring grants.

Thank you, and warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vanessa Green', enclosed within a simple, hand-drawn oval outline.

Vanessa Green, MS
Executive Director
The Network of Oregon Watershed Councils
(971) 701-6699
ed@oregonwatersheds.org
www.oregonwatersheds.org