Habitat in Action: Hood River Project Creates Hope for Wild Salmon, Steelhead

CCA Oregon recently helped pay for mulch, native trees and shrubs that were planted along the East Fork of the Hood River, a tributary of the Hood River that empties into the Columbia River. This project will improve juvenile rearing and adult holding and spawning habitat for ESA-listed winter steelhead, coho and spring chinook.

Located approximately one and a half miles from Parkdale, Oregon under the shadow of Mount Hood, the East Fork of the Hood River enhancement project is close to completion. The cost of the restoration project is roughly $800,000. The majority of the funding was provided by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs, and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. CCA Oregon partnered with the Hood River Watershed Group, the organization in charge of the instream portion of the project.

“The East Fork Hood River is a really important stream for steelhead, in particular winter steelhead,” says Cindy Thieman, Executive Director of the Hood River Watershed Group. “It’s a priority for us to boost natural population growth.”

In the summer of 2025, the HRWG brought in heavy operating equipment to install large wood structures along 1.7 miles of the river. That helped increase the number of side channels, created deeper pools, helped slow water velocity and collected spawning gravel in key areas. It also helped connect or recreate 1.6 miles of side channels.

While walking along the riverbank Thieman pointed out the river’s primary flood plain and its side channels had become entrenched offering less diverse fish habitat. “We wanted to reverse that trend with this project, so we added a lot of wood, but we also excavated (areas) with side channel zones and in the floodplain. A lot of it had been a single thread channel and we converted it to three or four threads in some areas.”

It appears to be working. There were clear signs where areas of the river were shallow and the current was slow to moderate creating better habitat for juvenile salmonids. The placing of large timber also helped create new side channels. Thieman added that they had a little help from Mother Nature.

“With the pretty big winter event we had in December — it was a 25-year event — it really moved a lot of gravel and so it interacted with our with the project features in a really fantastic way.”

While this riparian enhancement project began several years ago, CCA Oregon was approached to help with funding for bark mulch, native shrubs and trees that are planted along the riverbank.

“We were underfunded for the amount of plants that we have purchased, and this is a lot of territory,” Thieman says. “Having the additional plants allowed us to increase the density of the reoccurring plantings which really helps.”

She says CCA’s financial contribution allowed the Hood River Watershed Group to purchase an additional 4,000 plants along with bark mulch, which is placed around the trees helping to reduce moisture loss in the summer.

“In the long run these plants are going to stabilize the stream bank and create shade along the river, which is really important in the summertime,” Thieman says.

CCA’s contribution may appear small in comparison to the overall scope of the project, but a necessary and important part at a critical time.

“Knowing this project was close to completion, it is gratifying to be able to help the Hood River Watershed Group push it closer to the finish line,” said Jack Smith, CCA Oregon President and chair of Oregon’s Habitat Committee. “Because at the end of the day, our goal is to see more winter steelhead, coho and spring Chinook return to spawn in a healthy environment.”

CCA Oregon’s ongoing effort to bolster its profile as one of the leading conservation groups in Oregon will continue with its support of worthwhile habitat projects.

“Along with hatcheries, habitat has been and will continue to be a large focus for us,” says Pat Hoglund, CCA Oregon Executive Director. “And it should be noted that funding for projects like this would not be possible were it not for the generous donations from our members. Almost two years ago the habitat committee was created with projects like this in mind. We began raising money at our chapter banquets, and through our website’s donation page, and our members have stepped up in a big way. It’s rewarding to know that everyone who has donated to our habitat fund is seeing their donations put to good use.”