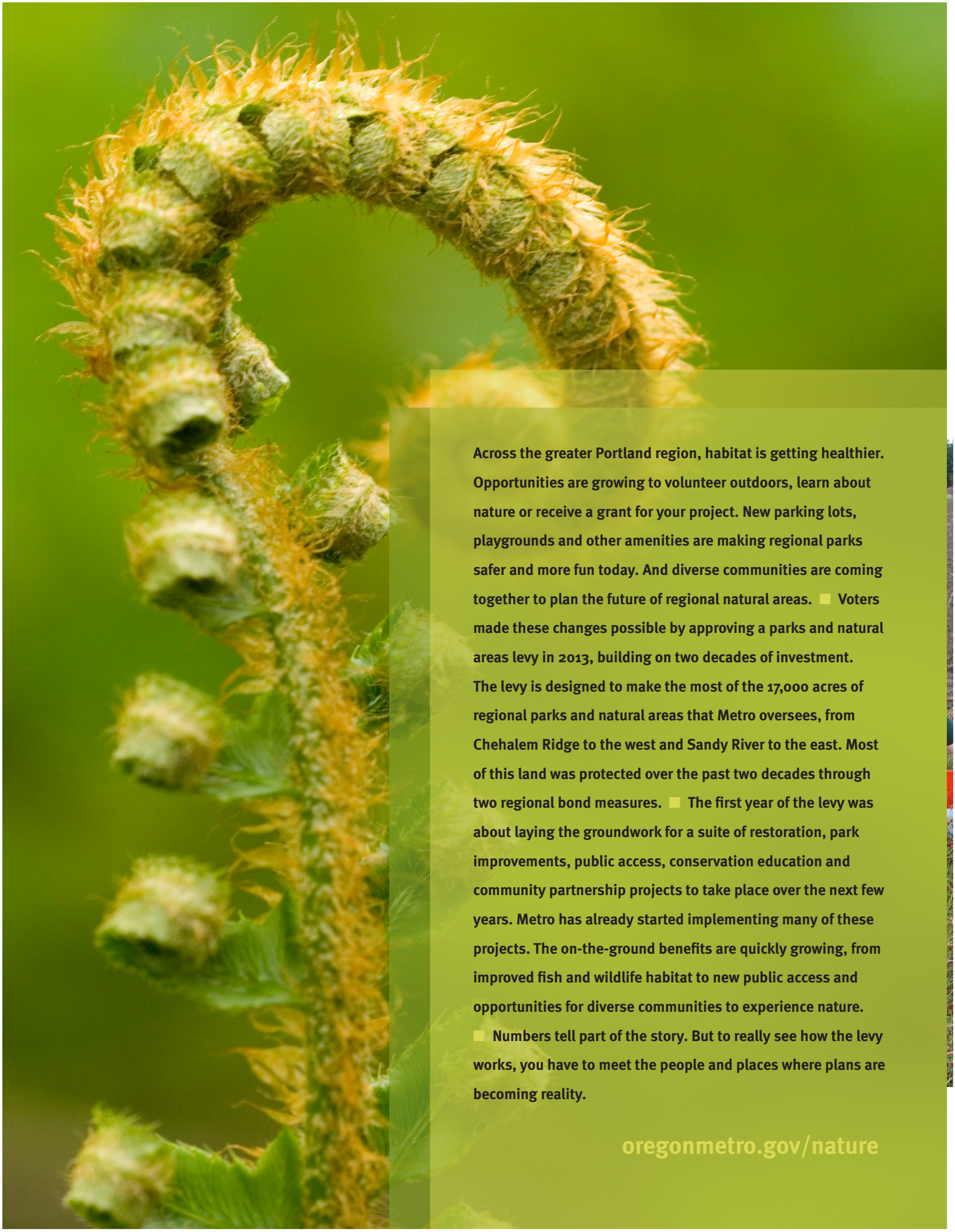
FALL 2014

PARKS AND NATURAL AREAS LEVY REPORT

IT'S OUR NATURE

Metro

Whether you're in the mood for a short hike or a weekend camping trip, a boat ride or a picnic, Metro has a destination for you. You'll share the landscape with salmon swimming in restored streams, birds streaking across the sky and giant old oak trees towering overhead. Thanks to voters, you can explore 17,000 acres of regional parks, trails and natural areas across the Portland metropolitan region. You also have opportunities to take nature classes and volunteer at these special places.



Across the greater Portland region, habitat is getting healthier. Opportunities are growing to volunteer outdoors, learn about nature or receive a grant for your project. New parking lots, playgrounds and other amenities are making regional parks safer and more fun today. And diverse communities are coming together to plan the future of regional natural areas.

Voters made these changes possible by approving a parks and natural areas levy in 2013, building on two decades of investment. The levy is designed to make the most of the 17,000 acres of regional parks and natural areas that Metro oversees, from Chehalem Ridge to the west and Sandy River to the east. Most of this land was protected over the past two decades through two regional bond measures.

The first year of the levy was about laying the groundwork for a suite of restoration, park improvements, public access, conservation education and community partnership projects to take place over the next few years. Metro has already started implementing many of these projects. The on-the-ground benefits are quickly growing, from improved fish and wildlife habitat to new public access and opportunities for diverse communities to experience nature.

Numbers tell part of the story. But to really see how the levy works, you have to meet the people and places where plans are becoming reality.

oregonmetro.gov/nature

Restoration and maintenance

The largest share of the levy – about half of the money – is dedicated to improving habitat and protecting water quality across the region. This year, Metro's natural areas science and land management teams launched a range of projects, including thinning overcrowded forests, enhancing salmon habitat, treating invasive weeds, and restoring wetland, prairie and oak habitat. In addition to work on the ground, the teams laid the groundwork for long-term restoration and system-wide stewardship across Metro's portfolio of natural areas.

36 restoration and natural areas maintenance projects were completed or started

Projects took place at **48** of the 100 natural area sites that Metro manages

294 weed treatments were completed at **44** sites

5 stream restoration projects got underway

Native trees and shrubs were planted at **18** sites

Metro's Native Plant Center provided **168,000** plants and over **200** lbs of seed from approximately 100 species to restore natural areas and keep them healthy

JOHNSON CREEK RESTORATION WORK BENEFITS FISH – AND PEOPLE

Fish are a lot more comfortable in Johnson Creek thanks to levy-funded restoration work that occurred in the summer of 2014.

About $145,000 of levy money paid for the restoration of crucial fish habitat along a mile of the upper Johnson Creek watershed in east Multnomah County.

Crews dragged logs to the stream and excavated holes along the banks to bury wood and boulders. During heavy winter rains, the logs and boulders will slow and push floodwaters back onto the floodplain.

The carefully engineered wood jams also create shady alcoves for salmon. Large logs, particularly ones with giant rootwads attached, serve as the "furniture" of the creek for sheltering fish. The wood jams – part of a riparian area with trees of many sizes – also provide important habitat for insects and wildlife.

Johnson Creek is just one of the many streams where Metro and partner agencies have targeted restoration efforts. Studies have shown that the Johnson Creek watershed suffers from isolated floodplains, a lack of plants along the banks and low levels of large wood.

Since 1995, Metro has acquired more than three miles along Johnson Creek and its tributaries, creating new natural areas and helping to connect habitat with other protected lands.

NATIVE PLANTS TRANSFORM FLOODPLAIN WETLANDS

Metro converted about 40 acres of floodplain wetlands in Wilsonville from invasive plants to native vegetation that attracts birds and wildlife.

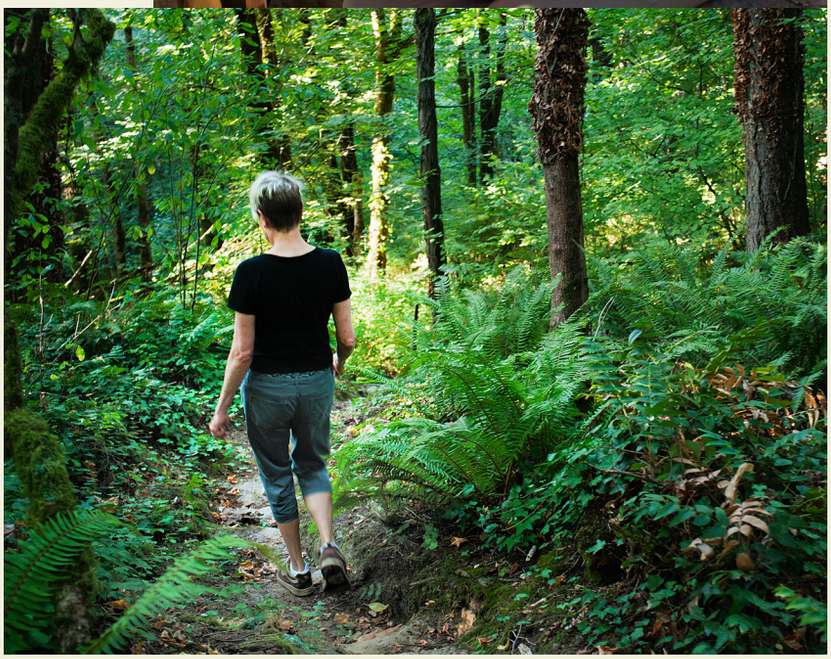
The transformation took place at Coffee Lake Creek Wetlands, where Metro—thanks to voters—is working to restore the full 226-acre area to its natural roots. For decades ditches have traversed the site's fields. While important for agricultural uses, they also create the perfect conditions for invasive weeds such as reed canarygrass, thistle and blackberry.

In the first year of the levy, Metro partnered with Ducks Unlimited to eradicate the invasive plants. In their place, crews planted about 75,000 native roses, Douglas spirea, Pacific ninebark, several types of willows, red twig dogwood and other native plants. The plantings occurred in two rounds from December 2013 to February 2014.

"Fields covered by reed canarygrass and blackberry don't have much habitat value," said Curt Zonick, a senior natural resource scientist at Metro. "Replacing these species with native plants encourages wildlife to come back. By returning willows and other native trees and shrubs, we're creating a food source for beavers, which in turn build dams and ponds to create habitat for native frogs and turtles."

Animals benefiting from the native plants include willow flycatcher birds, common yellowthroat warblers, Northern red-legged frogs, Western pond turtles, beavers, blue herons and others.

About $82,000 of first-year levy funds were used on the project, and $63,200 in grant money Ducks Unlimited received from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also supported this habitat restoration.



Access to nature

The levy provides the opportunity for people across the region to experience many of the natural areas they have protected over the past two decades through two successful bond measures. Access to Nature projects focus on safety and low-impact improvements, while emphasizing walking and hiking opportunities for visitors. Metro is exploring ways to eliminate community barriers to parks and natural areas so all people feel welcome. This year, Metro also began developing a system plan to guide regional parks, trails, natural areas and nature programs for decades to come – beginning with identifying shared values, strategies and actions to make the most of voter-protected land.

COMMUNITY GATHERS TO PLAN NEXT CHAPTER FOR NEWELL CREEK CANYON

Surrounded by Oregon City neighborhoods and Clackamas Community College, Newell Creek Canyon Natural Area provides spectacular scenery and wildlife habitat – from its namesake creek to groves of Western red cedar trees, from deer to red-legged frogs. This place is so beloved, some neighbors walked door-to-door to campaign for the region's first natural areas bond measure two decades ago. The measure passed, and Metro swiftly began buying land in the canyon.

But the 215-acre natural area also faces challenges, including transient encampments, littering and unauthorized trails. Until voters passed the levy in 2013, Metro didn't have resources to plan for the future of Newell Creek Canyon.

In spring 2014, Metro brought together longtime advocates, curious newcomers and a diverse collection of community partners to develop a vision for Newell Creek Canyon and the investments to support it. More than 100 people attended a kickoff open house to share their hopes, ideas and concerns for the natural area.

"People haven't always realized what a treasure they have at Newell," says Rita Baker, coordinator of the Greater Oregon City Watershed Council – a key player in restoring the canyon's habitat. "When you drive up (Highway) 213, you see, 'Oh, look at all the pretty trees.' But you don't really understand that, at the bottom, is a creek."

Metro continues to work with the community on a blueprint for Newell Creek Canyon, with a plan expected to be finalized in summer 2015. Next up: investing in the work to carry it out.

Even with new trails, signs or native plants, Newell Creek Canyon will never be "done," says longtime neighbor and supporter Sha Spady. Like all natural areas, it will change over time. "The biggest legacy we could leave after 25 years is, we've done nothing except provided the opportunity to heal," she says. "And this is what it looks like."

Park improvements

Annually, about 1.3 million visitors enjoy Metro's developed parks, including Blue Lake Regional Park, Oxbow Regional Park, Mason Hill Park, Graham Oaks Nature Park and Cooper Mountain Nature Park, among others. Levy investments at developed parks focus on improving sustainability features, upgrading facilities that have reached the end of their life expectancy, and enhancing safety and security.

12 park improvement projects are completed or underway

At Blue Lake Regional Park, over **53,500** square feet of non-native plantings were converted to primarily native plantings that require less water

Completed upgrades to booths, entry drives and parking lots at **3** parks

Replaced signage and fencing at **3** parks

Renovated playgrounds and site furnishings at **3** parks

Upgraded a radio communications system to make Oxbow Regional Park safer and more accessible

Began work on a regional parks business plan to ensure high-quality customer service and compliance with federal guidelines, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act

LEVY PROJECTS MAKE FOR BETTER (AND SAFER) PICNICS, BARBEQUES AND OTHER FUN AT REGIONAL PARKS

A number of essential improvements at Metro parks and boat launches are on the ground, including new grills, picnic benches, pay stations and parking lots. All of the improvements make it more convenient and safe for park visitors to get out and play.

At Oxbow Regional Park, the levy funded new grills, which means even tastier barbecues. And more people will get to enjoy them, because wheelchair-accessible picnic benches and pathways are now available.

The park is now safer with the installation of a new digital radio communications system. The system makes day-to-day coordination more efficient for park rangers and also provides crucial communications for emergency situations.

Also thanks to the levy, Cooper Mountain Nature Park has a new overflow parking lot with 14 spaces that will help alleviate crowding during popular summer days. The lot has a permeable surface that better absorbs stormwater. Parking improvements also occurred at Glendoveer Golf and Tennis Center at the head of the two-mile fitness trail, which is popular with joggers and walkers.

At Blue Lake Regional Park, several landscape areas were converted to native, low-water-use plants. Planning work was also done on a new entryway and four new restroom buildings, with construction scheduled for next year.

Conservation education and volunteer programs

Thanks to the levy, Metro's conservation education program is engaging more people, nurturing future conservation leaders, and creating opportunities for people of all ages to learn about and experience nature. Opportunities for volunteers also expanded at regional parks and natural areas. For example, Metro's site steward program – through which volunteer stewards care for a specific natural area over time – added nine new sites and implemented new data collection technology to better inform how sites are managed over the long term.

YOUTH ECOLOGY CORPS CREATES A GATEWAY TO NATURE

On a warm summer day, elected officials and regional conservation leaders strolled through Beavercreek Natural Area to learn about invasive species, salmon restoration, water quality and more. Their teachers: members of Metro's new Youth Ecology Corps.

This moment in the spotlight underscored a successful launch for the program, which provides paid work opportunities for youths to develop conservation skills and environmental literacy. To run the program, Metro partnered with Project YESS at Mt. Hood Community College.

Project YESS participants have left traditional high schools for a variety of reasons, and they come from families at or below the federal poverty line. To join Metro's Youth Ecology Corps, they must first participate in entry-level work opportunities and complete their general equivalency diploma through Project YESS.

Corps members work at a variety of Metro sites, and lessons change with the seasons: spring focuses on bird identification and botany, summer centers on wildlife tracking, fall converges on salmon spawning and mushrooms, and winter spotlights geology and wilderness survival skills.

"Just being outdoors, we want to hook them so that they fall hopelessly in love with nature," Metro naturalist Dan Daly said.

Bradley Fuller, 19, says the program has changed his life. "It's opened my eyes to the importance of habitat restoration, and even just plain nature restoration," Fuller says. "I feel like a much healthier person, and in the midst of doing what I love, I gain valuable skills and experience to further my career in this field."

Fuller says he's especially interested in learning more about botany and medicinal plants. "I don't just *want to*, I am *going to* do outdoor work for a living," he says. "I love, love, love the outdoors. I wouldn't be myself without it."

Supported 3,525 young people participating in nature education programs

Developed public, group and field trip programming plans for future levy years

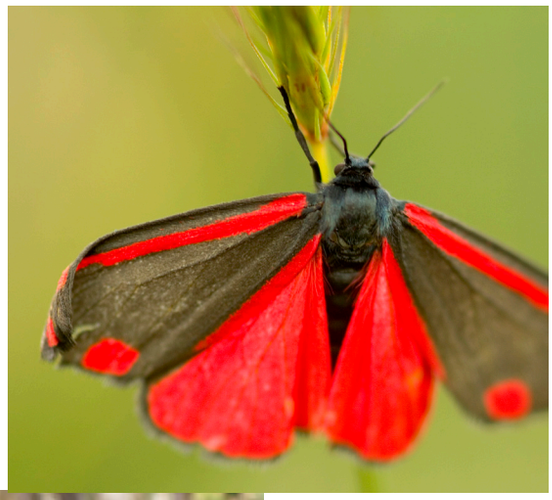
510 hours of work and education logged by seven at-risk youths in the first cohort for Metro's new Youth Ecology Corps

The Native Plant Center added 19 new volunteer assistants, nearly tripling volunteer hours from 400 to 1180 this year

Community grants

Metro's Nature in Neighborhoods community grants support habitat restoration, conservation education and other projects that connect people with nature close to home.

The levy expanded this successful program and added a focus on regional trails. During the first levy year, the Nature in Neighborhoods team facilitated two grant cycles – restoration and conservation – to culminate in the Metro Council awarding $1.5 million in levy funds early in year two.



18 people shared their expertise and passion by serving as grant review committee members

Received **74** preliminary applications for conservation education grants

Received **43** preliminary applications for restoration grants

More than **200** people and groups engaged with the grants team through workshops, outreach events and personal contact

CONSERVATION EDUCATION GRANTS CONNECT PEOPLE WITH NATURE

Thanks to a $700,000 boost from Metro's Nature in Neighborhoods conservation education grants, immigrants are growing food at community gardens, more Latino children are exploring the outdoors as part of after-school and summer programs, and a new online trail map will help people with disabilities find excursions that are a good fit for them. And that's just for starters.

Metro's popular nature grant program expanded with resources from the levy to include a special round of grants focused on conservation education. The 15 recipients connect people around the region to the natural environment through restoration projects and nature education.

"We are creating a whole generation of informed, educated, caring people who probably wouldn't have had these opportunities," Metro Councilor Carlotta Collette says. "These are multicultural, very diverse audiences. We are learning about how other cultures experience nature, and in order to preserve it, we need to know why they would care."

The conservation education grants have a special focus on diverse and underserved communities. For example, two grants involve partners to engage Native Americans in conservation initiatives.

The Sense of Place program will partner with tribal and urban native communities throughout the region to strengthen partnerships and foster communication and collaboration. Through the Oakquest project, two Native American college students led volunteer crews to map the region's remaining oak habitat through an iPhone app.

"We're doing something significant in terms of educating the public about the environment," said Oakquest crew leader Sequoia Breck, "to remind them to value the habitat we all share."

Equity and inclusion

The levy voiced a strong commitment to expanding opportunities for historically underserved populations to experience nature. Across program areas, Metro is working to ensure everybody feels welcome at the region's parks and natural areas. Partners in Nature is a new initiative to partner with organizations serving communities of color and low-income families to develop culturally-specific opportunities for experiencing nature.

Metro is also spending levy money more equitably by strategically contracting with more minority- and women-owned and emerging small business firms on levy restoration, park operations and land management projects. Social equity is now also a core aspect of levy-funded Nature in Neighborhoods grant programs, with a goal of granting funds for nature education and restoration directly to community-based organizations that help underserved communities.

PARTNERS IN NATURE

On a brisk, gray day in February, 23 immigrants from countries including Iran, Myanmar and Somalia gathered at Cooper Mountain Nature Park near Beaverton. The group from the Center for Intercultural Organizing explored the oak and prairie landscape and learned about the benefits of native plants, food webs and wildlife habitat, guided by Metro natural resources scientist Kate Holleran and naturalist Deb Scrivens.

The expedition was part of Metro's first Partners in Nature collaboration, designed to enhance the center's year-long Pan-Immigrant Leadership and Organizing Training program with opportunities to learn about nature and civic engagement.

Participants' awareness, engagement and enthusiasm for getting out into nature continued to grow through outings to Smith and Bybee Wetlands Natural Area and Blue Lake Regional Park.

"At the beginning of the partnership with Metro, I wasn't sure how it was going to go," Kayse Jama, director of the Center for Intercultural Organizing, said at the end of the first year. "We weren't sure how interested people would be in it. I have to admit, I was blown away by how folks were very interested and very much enjoyed it."

4 partnerships were formed through Partners in Nature with organizations serving communities of color or low-income families; **340** people – mostly children and teenagers – have participated in opportunities created through these partnerships

Metro contracted with **31** minority- and women-owned and emerging small business firms for levy projects – about **25** percent of all levy business

More than half of the first round of Nature in Neighborhoods conservation education grant funding went to projects led by or partnered with culturally-specific community-based organizations

Metro is working more closely with tribes, including through collaboration with the Native American Community Advisory Council

What's next

Metro hit the ground running during the levy's first year, laying the groundwork for both complex and smaller-scale restoration and public access projects, park operations improvements, conservation education and community partnerships, and grant-making across the region. Many of these projects have already shifted into implementation phases. The on-the-ground results are healthier habitat for fish and wildlife, improved water quality, new public access and amenities at some of the region's premier parks and natural areas, and new opportunities for the region's diverse communities to experience and learn about nature.

The next several years of the levy will build on these early successes. Habitat restoration is underway in streams, forests and oak woodlands, from Beaver Creek Natural Area in the east to Quamash Prairie in the west. Comprehensive planning is underway for Newell Creek Canyon and North Tualatin Mountains natural areas, with opportunities for extensive community participation. At Oxbow Regional Park, Metro is creating "adventure base camps" that guide children and their families to nature play areas throughout the park, thanks to levy funds and a grant from the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. Other parks and natural areas will see new restrooms, entry booths and other improvements. More to come about these projects in next year's annual report.

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To learn more, log into oregonmetro.gov/nature, Metro's website that includes information on many of the levy projects and opportunities to get involved. Or contact us at 503.797.1545 or naturalareas@oregonmetro.gov.

Also, check out Our Big Backyard, a publication that features Metro nature news and regional issues, including updates on key levy projects and initiatives. Our Big Backyard is available at oregonmetro.gov/our-big-backyard-magazine and by paper subscription.