



Local people making local decisions to achieve conservation

2024-2025 Annual Report



Our Mission

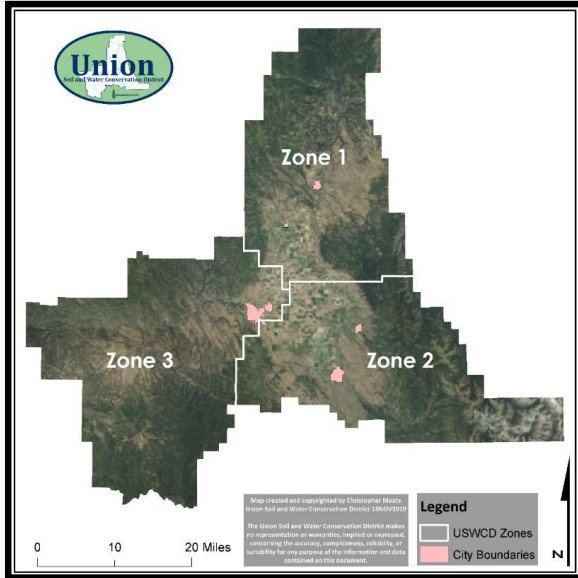
Assist and educate interested landowners in the development, protection, and conservation of natural resources.

How Can We Help You?

- **Assist** in developing, planning, permitting, designing, and applying for funding to improve and protect water quality, soil, and other resources.
- **Provide** technical support for the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and other Farm Bill opportunities.
- **Equipment rentals** of a rangeland seed drill, soil aerator, and tree planter.
- **Share** up-to-date information on flows and water quality attributes of the Grande Ronde River, Catherine Creek, and associated tributaries.

Organization of the Union Soil and Water Conservation District (Union SWCD)

The USWCD is one of 45 conservation districts in Oregon that are a form of local government under Oregon Revised Statutes 568.210-890 and 568.900-933, the laws which govern state agencies and special districts. The USWCD was established in 1946 and operates generally within the boundaries of Union County and the Upper Grande Ronde River Basin. Management is provided by five locally elected board members with three representing zones of the district area and two at-large directors providing broad representation of the entire district.



Board of Directors

Jarod Teeter - Chairman, Zone 1
Paul Boehne - Vice-Chairman, At-Large
Curtis Ricker - Treasurer, At-Large
Fred Wallender - Zone 2
Travis Hampton - Zone 3

Staff

Jim Webster - District Manager
Aaron Bliesner – Senior Project Manager
Renée Coxen – Conservationist and CREP Coordinator

2024-2025 Financial Summary		
Year Ended June 30th		
	<u>2024</u>	<u>2025</u>
Cash and Investments	\$414,454	\$419,198
Capital Assets	-	24,157
Total Assets	\$414,454	\$443,355
Total Liabilities	-	-
Net Position:		
Invested in Capital Assets	-	24,157
Unrestricted	414,454	419,198
Total Net Position	\$414,454	\$443,355

Elmer Dam Fish Passage and Flow Improvement Project

Major Milestone in Salmon Recovery Efforts

A multi-year effort to restore fish passage, improve irrigation efficiency, and modernize agricultural infrastructure at Elmer Dam is nearing completion. A **collaborative conservation** effort years in the making with multiple partners, this is a significant milestone for ecological restoration and local farming operations in the Catherine Creek basin. Located on Catherine Creek at river mile 13.1 near Cove, Oregon, the existing fishway associated with Elmer Dam required constant manual adjustments and hindered the migration of ESA-listed Snake River Chinook salmon and summer steelhead into and out of the basin.

Timing for these adult native salmon and steelhead to get to their spawning grounds and for juveniles to get out of Catherine Creek and back to the ocean is sensitive. Having unimpeded passage is essential to their continued existence. These species are critical to the cultural, ecological, and economic values of Northeast Oregon and the Pacific Northwest.

Reflecting a dual mission for fisheries recovery and agricultural support, the Project's goals are to:

- **Restore fish passage** for native species at all water levels
- **Improve agricultural efficiency** and reduce hydrologic disruption
- **Enhance aquatic habitat quality**
- **Improve the hydrologic regime and climate resilience** within the watershed



Key construction features include:

- **New vertical slot fishway** meeting passage standards with multiple elevations entrances
- **Dam improvements** to increase hydraulic control during spring high flows
- **Pump and intake improvements** moving pumps to wet wells, removing two intakes and screening the remaining intake
- **On farm upgrades**, including center pivot irrigation conversion and connecting off-channel reservoirs for more efficient water use

The 2025 Good Steward Award Winner: Hassinger Farms

Hassinger Farms and the Hassinger Family were presented the Good Steward Award for cooperation and collaboration with the Union SWCD to design and implement the Elmer Dam Fish Passage and Irrigation Upgrade Project. **A big THANKS for being such great partners to Phil and Trudy Hassinger, Jed Hassinger, and Seth Hassinger!**

The Good Steward Award is presented to individuals who promote conservation and land stewardship in coordination with agricultural operations. For agriculture to be successful over the long term, it is necessary to be good stewards of the land we manage.

The Union SWCD considers the following criteria when selecting the winners of this award each year:

1. Partnerships with the Union SWCD to complete projects or manage land for the purpose of conserving natural resources and promoting sustainable agriculture.
2. The amount or intensity of conservation practices implemented.
3. Projects that provide significant support to conservation and restoration of natural resources.



Agriculture Operator and Landowner Perspective by Jed Hassinger

Irrigation storage provided by the Elmer Dam is the lifeblood of our family farm, allowing us to produce a diverse range of field crops that otherwise wouldn't be possible. Built in the 1950s, the structure no longer met current fish passage standards and had become increasingly difficult to operate. As managers of the passage structure, we have been frustrated by the limitations of its design and performance, despite our best efforts to keep everything optimally adjusted each season. It was welcome news when we learned that the Union Soil and Water Conservation District would be leading an effort to help us update the structure.

The Elmer Dam Fish Passage and Irrigation Upgrade project is bringing the dam back into compliance while improving safety and day-to-day operations with a secondary spillway and a single screened intake fitted with a self-cleaning fish screen for our off-channel reservoirs.

The Union SWCD has proven to be a stellar partner to work through the complexities and challenges posed by the Elmer Dam project, of which there have been several. From fundraising to contractor vetting, permitting, weather challenges, materials procurement, and more, the SWCD staff has adapted to find solutions, all the while keeping us in the loop and seeking input on major decisions. It takes a lot of trust to partner with an entity like the Union SWCD on a project with such significant impacts to our operation. At this stage of the project, that trust appears to have been well-placed. I have every confidence that the SWCD will do what is necessary to see the project through to a positive outcome.

Little Creek Irrigation Diversions and Fish Passage Improvements

Little Creek is a tributary to Catherine Creek near Union, Oregon and contains six irrigation diversion structures that were built without fish screens or effective passage for native fish or salmonids. The Union SWCD has been working with landowners and irrigators to modernize these diversions, improving fish passage of all native fishes, while preserving access to irrigation water rights. Fish passage was first improved on the most downstream diversion (LC1) in 2011. Building on that success, the District collaborated with the Weaver and Israel-Ames Ditch organizations and contracted engineering assistance to complete designs in 2022 for improved fish passage and water access for the LC5 and LC6 diversions.

Construction of new diversion structures was completed for LC5 and LC6 in 2024 and included:

- Steel lay-down stanchion structures with flashboards
- Naturalized bypass channels
- New headgates set at appropriate elevations to allow water diversion and passage
- Newly constructed rotary drum fish screens
- Installation of new transfer piping and overflow structure at LC6.



Israel-Ames Diversion (LC6) prior to construction



LC6 Diversion after construction

Little Creek Diversions 2, 3, and 4; Future Planning

The Union SWCD is taking the next steps for addressing fish passage problems in Little Creek by beginning collaboration with landowners and gathering information for developing designs to update Diversions 2, 3, and 4. These structures are located downstream of the Weaver Diversion before Little Creek flows into Catherine Creek. Following updated construction of these three diversions, water rights holders will have improved structures that allow more efficient and safe operation for access to irrigation water, and Little Creek will have unimpeded fish passage for all native fish.

Restoring fish passage will ensure access to critical spawning, rearing and migration for salmonids and other native fish. The SWCD's efforts to work with private landowners balance agricultural water use with the ecological needs of important native fish species. Improving aquatic connectivity increases climate change resilience for aquatic species and stream health, while strengthening community partnerships that support sustainable land and water stewardship across the watershed.

The Union SWCD is a Soil Health Hub

The Union SWCD is partnering with the Oregon Climate and Agriculture Network (OrCAN) to be recognized as a Soil Health Hub. Currently in its pilot phase, the statewide Soil Health Network promotes soil health for climate resilience and works to connect farmers, ranchers, and farm service providers. OrCAN's vision is for a future where healthy soils are the foundation of thriving food systems in Oregon by reconnecting healthy ecosystems, economies, and communities.

As a Soil Health Hub, the Union SWCD is collaborating with the OrCAN network to identify needed resources, and provide services tailored to our region. These services will support implementation of soil health practices using land management strategies that maximize the presence of living roots, maximize soil cover, maximize biodiversity, and minimize disturbance (adapted from NRCS principles).

The Union SWCD will have access to a network of place-based, bioregion-specific resources to provide and connect producers to technical assistance, information and tools, equipment, soil health assessments and implementation grants. **The Union SWCD looks forward to learning, using, and promoting these resources for soil health to support producers in Union County!**

Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board Small Grants

As a local sponsor for the OWEB Small Grant Program, the Union SWCD can assist landowners with the implementation of on-the-ground restoration projects that improve water quality and conserve natural resources on private lands. Projects may include spring developments, off-channel water developments, windbreaks, riparian exclusion fencing, and more. **Grant awards up to \$20,000 and require a match contribution from the landowner of 25% value** that can be in the form of cash, in-kind services or materials. The Union SWCD can help landowners identify concerns, develop project solutions, and apply for funding.

Recently, the Union SWCD assisted landowners with securing Small Grant funding to **improve forest health on private lands** by treating dense stands of pre-commercial sized conifers. Reducing the overall stocking in the upland forest stands will increase the understory grass and forb production, reduce fuel loading to help decrease the risk of wildfire, increase the size of trees available for woody debris recruitment, reduce erosion, and increase ground water to support summer base flows.

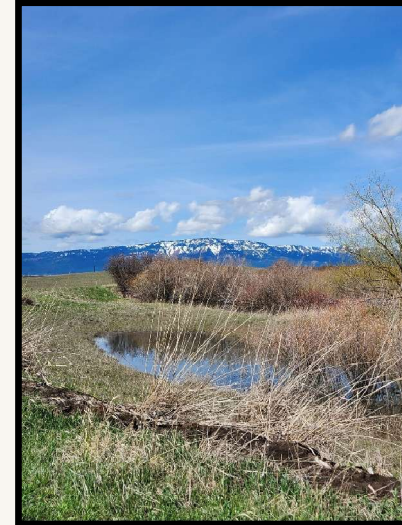
The Union SWCD also assisted landowners with securing Small Grant funding to construct a four-strand barbed wire fence on Little Creek near Union, Oregon with water gaps to **control livestock access** to a fish-bearing stream and safeguard the riparian area from livestock impacts. Controlling livestock access will improve riparian vegetation communities, increase streambank stability, reduce grazing impacts of streamside deciduous hardwoods, and reduce livestock damage to wetland soils adjacent to the stream channel.

For more information on OWEB Small Grants, contact Renée Coxen at rcoxen@unionswcd.org

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

Union County relies on healthy rivers and waterways for agriculture, recreation, and more. CREP is a voluntary Farm Bill program that provides financial and technical assistance for landowners to restore riparian areas on agricultural land which may have been altered by historic grazing or crop production. The Union SWCD, Farm Service Agency (FSA), and Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) collaborate to provide technical support for landowners in Union County that may be interested in enrolling in CREP. **If you have a stream running through your agricultural land that demonstrates a need for restoration, you may be eligible for CREP.**

Oregon's program is unique in having a cumulative impact incentive payment for a landowner or neighboring landowners who enroll more than 50% of 5-mile stream segment. Participants commit to keeping land out of agricultural production for the life of a 10 to 15-year contract. In exchange, you receive cost-share assistance funding for restoration and annual rental payments.



NRCS and Farm Bill Programs

The Union SWCD regularly advises, supports, and encourages our community to work with the Natural Resources Conservation Service to take advantage of the programs they offer under the Farm Bill to help farmers, ranchers, family forests, Tribes, and conservation partners perform voluntary conservation on private lands. The programs they offer include:

- The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Conservation Incentive Strategy (CIS)
- Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
- Regenerative Pilot Program (NEW)
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)
- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP)

Contact Ana Gordon (541) 963-4178, (ana.gordon@usda.gov) or visit the NRCS La Grande Service Center at 1901 Adams Ave, Suite 6, La Grande, OR 97850 for more information.

Union SWCD Partners

A BIG THANKS to our partners and colleagues for their assistance and support!

BOR – U.S. Bureau of Reclamation	BPA – Bonneville Power Administration
CTUIR – Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation	FSA – Farm Service Agency
GRMW – Grande Ronde Model Watershed	NOAA Fisheries – National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NRCS – Natural Resources Conservation Service	OACD – Oregon Association of Conservation Districts
ODA – Oregon Department of Agriculture	ODF – Oregon Department of Forestry
ODFW – Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife	ODSL – Oregon Department of State Lands
OSU Extension – Oregon State University	OWEB – Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board
OWRD – Oregon Water Resources Department	TCCWMA – Tri-County Cooperative Weed Management Area
TU – Trout Unlimited	Union County – Planning and Public Works
USACE – U.S. Army Corps. of Engineers	USFWS – U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USFS – U.S. Forest Service	

Contact Us

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La Grande, OR 97850

The District prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, age, color, national origin, gender, religion, political beliefs, disability, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means when working with the District should contact us.