

### A YEAR OF RECOVERY

Looking back on 2021, it was a year of extremes. The Skagit saw extreme heat in the summer, extreme floods in the fall, and extreme cold in the winter, while the world continued to be in a state of extreme uncertainty as the COVID-19 pandemic continued in its second year. However despite these bumps in the road, there was much to grateful for in terms of salmon recovery and COVID recovery. Skagit Fisheries had a wonderful time celebrating our 30-year anniversary and sharing our collective accomplishments with the community. We had the opportunity to visit with old friends and share stories of success as we conducted interview segments and visited past project sites. It was quite rewarding to revisit a number of projects that were completed in the past and share how they are doing now. Most of these projects have multiple benefits and some of these benefits are greater realized years later after trees start to mature and natural forest ecosystems start to take form.

In addition to celebrating past accomplishments, it was also a very exciting year for new salmon recovery projects! We implemented important projects from the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan in both the upper and lower floodplains of the Skagit River. Restoring floodplain habitat and reconnecting side channel habitat to the Skagit River that is truly critical to the recovery of Skagit Chinook salmon.

The Pressentin Park Habitat Restoration Project is likely the largest and most important Chinook Recovery project Skagit Fisheries has done to date. For almost a decade we have been working with Skagit County Parks to restore a historic side channel through the Park that would maximize salmon benefit while also providing a diversity of new low impact recreation opportunities for the community and visitors. This year thanks to an amazing team from Skagit County, Reichhardt and Ebe, and Tiger Construction, accompanied by tremendous volunteer support, this channel was finally recreated and reconnected to the Skagit River. Salmon immediately began using the new habitat this fall, and we are greatly looking forward to the community having new opportunities to view salmon while enjoying a growing forest at this upriver Park.

The Skagit Forks Restoration Project is another very important Chinook Recovery project listed in the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan that was constructed this year. This project located at the outlet of Britt Slough reconnected critical slough and wetland habitat to the lower Skagit River. This type of off-channel habitat is extremely limited in the lower Skagit, where most of the river is diked. This project offered a unique opportunity to restore floodplain habitat between the dike and the river on WDFW owned land.

We were also very busy revegetating important floodplain habitats and side channels of the Skagit to aid in Chinook recovery. In 2021, a diversity of community volunteers, staff, and AmeriCorps crews planted over 42,000 native plants along important salmon waterways from the delta near Conway to the upper floodplain reaches near Marblemount. And of course in addition to these large scale projects, assistance was also provided to numerous private landowners with smaller projects to help them restore riparian areas on their land.

This year we are looking forward to a year filled with correcting fish passage problems. We currently have 7 fish passage correction projects planned for construction in 2022, while we have already put in grant applications for several more fish passage projects for 2023 construction. These projects represent years of working with the County and Tribes to fully identify where fish passage work is needed and an effort to work collaboratively to fix public and private crossings along streams to make watersheds fully accessible to salmon and steelhead.

While tremendous work has been done and more is planned, there is still further recovery work to do. We are forever grateful for you, our community, that supports this important work to restore habitat and engage our community to ensure healthy watersheds, healthy salmon, and healthy communities for all of us. Thank you for enabling this great body of work to continue to take place.

Gratefully,



ALISON STUDLEY
Executive Director



Our mission is to educate and engage the community in habitat restoration and watershed stewardship to enhance salmon.

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# RIPARIAN PLANTINGS | 42,365 NATIVE PLANTS

Over 48 acres of streams and shorelines revegetated with native plants

HABITAT OPENED | 1.7 MILES of habitat reconnected by removing fish passage barriers and reconnecting side channel habitat

COMMUNITY OUTREACH | 1,297 INDIVIDUALS reached through community engagement programs

VOLUNTEER INVOLVEMENT | 8,674 HOURS donated by community volunteers

KIDS EDUCATED | 771 STUDENTS engaged in environmental science education programs

KNOTWEED SURVEYED | 34 MILES of river surveyed for invasive knotweed

FISH PASSAGE | 28 CULVERTS assessed to determine fish passability

## 2021 FINANCIAL SUMMARY

INCOME \$2,106,891

PRIVATE GRANTS & CONTRACTS \$282,189 - DONATIONS \$105,945 \$2,018,374

ADMINISTRATION -\$173,166 FUNDRAISING\$17,530

9%

PUBLIC GRANTS & CONTRACTS \$1,718,756

PROGRAMS **\$1,817678** 

## RECONNECTING HABITAT



Removing the "plug" to reconnect Pressentin Slough to the Skagit River.

#### PRESSENTIN PARK

The Pressentin Park project is restoring important habitat for Chinook salmon by reconnecting a one-half mile historic side channel to the Skagit River. Located in Marblemount on Skagit County Parks land, this important Chinook recovery project is not only reconnecting critical side channel habitat for Chinook salmon, it's also restoring habitat for many other wildlife species, helping to feed endangered orcas, and bringing new recreational benefits to the community. Immediately after connecting the restored channel to the Skagit River, salmon began using it. Spawner survey volunteers counted adult Chinook, coho, and hundreds of pink salmon using the new habitat. This spring we are certain juvenile salmon will be found using the habitat as well. Recreational amenities added to the Park through grants secured by Skagit County include a new parking area, walking trails, bike-in campsites, picnic shelters, and a playground. Skagit Fisheries developed and installed interpretive signs for the Park. These signs highlight the direct connections between riparian forest ecosystems, native communities, salmon, and orcas. As part of the restoration effort, the project removed invasive plants in the floodplain and restored over 12 acres of riparian area along the new channel with 13,000 native trees and shrubs. The community has been very supportive of this project with over 120 volunteers participating in planting parties held this fall. Although record flooding occurred while we were planting, community volunteers returned in force as the waters receded to continue the restoration efforts.

# SWEDE CREEK FISH PASSAGE IMPROVEMENT

This project worked with a private landowner to complete a fish passage barrier removal project on Swede Creek near Sedro-Woolley. Using Family Forest Fish Passage Program funds, Skagit Fisheries hired Kysar and Koistenin, Inc. to remove four undersized culverts that were creating a barrier to fish passage for coho salmon, steelhead trout, and sea-run cutthroat trout. The culverts were replaced with a 40-foot steel bridge fabricated by RTI Bridge. This project built upon a previous downstream barrier removal project completed in 2019. The project completed in 2021 opened fish access to an additional 0.7 miles of high-quality spawning and rearing habitat in Swede Creek including a 6-acre pond, and over 80-acres of wetland habitat. After project completion, volunteers documented over 100 coho salmon spawning in Swede Creek for the first time in many years. Salmon are returning thanks to working with private landowners to remove these fish passage barriers along on Swede Creek at two locations. While the first project was completed in 2019, it was not until this second project was completed that salmon have really found their way back to Swede



Constructing a new bridge crossing at Swede Creek to improve fish passage for coho salmon and steelhead trout in cooperation with private landowners.



Volunteers and staff documenting juvenile Chinook use before the Skagit Forks restoration project was constructed.

# SKAGIT FORKS WETLAND RECONNECTION

Where the Skagit River forks to create Fir Island, Skagit Fisheries implemented a restoration project to reconnect the outlet of Britt Slough and a large wetland complex to the South Fork of the Skagit River. This important Chinook recovery project took place on WDFW land located between the dike and the South Fork of the Skagit River with engineering assistance provided by the Skagit Conservation District. Reconnecting this restored offchannel habitat and wetland complex to the Skagit River provides much needed habitat for juvenile Chinook salmon in the lower Skagit floodplain. Young Chinook salmon seek out areas of slow-moving water as they migrate to the estuary as places to rest and grow larger before reaching the salt water. Access to this type of off-channel and wetland habitat is extremely limited in the lower Skagit River floodplain where most of the river is diked. This project offered a unique opportunity to restore floodplain habitat between the dike and the river on publicly owned land. Skagit Fisheries staff, a Washington Conservation Corps crew, and student volunteers planted 5,280 trees along the restored channel and throughout the floodplain of the project site. Volunteers and staff also participated in monitoring activities to document salmon use prior to project construction. Next year we look forward to continuing to assist with monitoring efforts and document salmon use of this reconnected habitat.



# MONITORING DOCUMENTS RECOVERY

#### **SPAWNER SURVEYS**

Training volunteers to document returning salmon is one of our most exciting volunteer opportunities. Teams of two volunteers walk selected creeks to track the number and species of adult salmon returning to spawn. We are especially interested in documenting salmon use upstream of where fish passage improvement projects have occurred. Volunteers are trained to identify salmon species and their redds (nests) and then walk their chosen creek each and every week throughout the fall and winter spawning season. Volunteers usually get a vigorous workout walking their assigned creek and are excited to share the news of salmon returning to their sites. Skagit Fisheries has been training volunteers to count returning salmon for more than 20 years and providing valuable data to the fisheries co-managers at Washington State and the Tribes.



AmeriCorps member Casey Hart showing off a coho carcass while conducting spawner surveys for Ennis Creek.



Native trees loaded up and ready to be planted at a restoration site.

#### **VEGETATION MONITORING**

Each year, Skagit Fisheries trains volunteers and student interns to collect valuable data related to vegetation survival and growth to track the success of riparian restoration sites. As an organization that plants tens of thousands of trees each year to restore habitat, it is important to know whether the trees and plants are surviving, thriving, and ultimately on the trajectory of recreating native forest ecosystems along our waterways. The data collected by this monitoring effort are shared with funders, researchers, and public agencies to document effectiveness of revegetation efforts. The data also provide valuable insights into how we can adapt our planting techniques and restoration strategies to maximize the intended benefits. Our goal is to have 80% survival of the trees and shrubs planted at each riparian restoration site. In 2021 trained volunteers and interns assisted riparian restoration staff with monitoring 25 planting sites and documented a 90% survival rate.

#### **KNOTWEED CONTROL**

The Upper Skagit Knotweed Control Program works with partners throughout the Skagit Watershed to control knotweed along the upper Skagit River and its tributaries. Skagit Fisheries has been a leader in controlling knotweed in the Upper Skagit Watershed since we inherited the program from The Nature Conservancy in 2010. The original project area was upstream from the Skagit-Sauk River confluence in Rockport. In 2018, after many years of intense effort and continued success year after year of finding less and less knotweed in these upper most reaches of the watershed, Skagit Fisheries thought that enough progress had been made to expand the program downstream of Rockport to Concrete. In 2021, Skagit Fisheries assisted by a Washington Conservation Corps crew, surveyed and treated knotweed along 34 miles of the Skagit River and various tributaries while traversing 3,827 acres of floodplain habitat. We treated 388 knotweed patches in this area. The incredible part about this program is that it has made a tremendous difference in controlling knotweed. It is a remarkable accomplishment to walk, float, or drive along the upper Skagit River and not see huge patches of knotweed like one does along other rivers throughout the Puget Sound.



WCC members work to confirm the location of a dead knotweed patch along the Skagit.





Pink salmon, or humpies, return to the Skagit River every other year in odd years. In 2021, volunteers counted hundreds of pink salmon using the newly restored side channel habitat at Pressentin Park in Marblemount.

#### **SALMON SIGHTINGS**

PHOTO CREDIT JESSICA NEWLY

Salmon Sighting returned in person this year as a safe outdoor activity. Salmon Sighting events enable our community to have the awe-inspiring experience of observing wild salmon spawning in local creeks. While the Skagit and Samish watersheds are home to 5 different salmon species, it can be challenging to find public places where it is safe to observe these amazing creatures. Salmon Sighting events are designed to provide community members an opportunity to observe live salmon spawning in creeks and learn about salmon species and their habitat from docents. This year we were excited to host salmon sighting events happening from the upper Skagit at Pressentin Park to Oyster Creek along Samish Bay. Volunteers observed many species of salmon using the newly constructed channel at Pressentin Park this fall and we are excited to host many more salmon sighting events there in the future.

Planting trees is one of the simplest actions we can all take to help restore salmon habitat. Restoring riparian habitat means that we are planting native trees and shrubs in the area adjacent to a river, stream, or other water body. Revegetating the riparian areas of waterways not only helps to restore habitat for salmon it also helps to filter pollutants and keep our waterways clean and healthy for shellfish, wildlife, and our community. This past year, community members, students, Skagit Fisheries staff, Washington Conservation Corps members and EarthCorps members planted over 42,000 native plants along local waterways! Skagit Fisheries takes pride in providing opportunities for individuals and groups of all ages and abilities to be a part of tree planting events. In addition to planting trees at restoration sites throughout the Skagit Valley, volunteers also help us grow trees for future restoration projects at our native plant nursery. A new partnership with Grow it Forward is expanding our ability to grow more trees, by engaging volunteers in operating "micro-nurseries" in their own backyards. Volunteers grow 100 native plants to a larger size and then bring them to restoration sites to be planted. This year, major riparian restoration projects were located along many side channels of the Skagit River important to Chinook salmon including Britt Slough, DeBays Slough, Anderson Slough, Day Slough, and the new Pressentin Park Slough.



Community members posing by a newly planted tree during a planting party. A huge diversity of people were involved in planting over 13,000 native plants at Pressentin Park in Marblemount.



Bayview Elementary students test the water quality in Hansen Creek and learn how water quality impacts salmon as part of the Salmon in the Classroom program.

#### STUDENT EDUCATION

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted our ability to teach children in-person during the 2020-21 school year. So we are all very excited to welcome back our student education programs in-person for the 2021-22 school year! After a year of no field trips and no classroom visits, it has been very fulfilling to work with students in hands-on situations again. This year we expanded our Salmon in the Classroom program thanks to funding from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. Students at 10 elementary schools have received eggs, and will watch them hatch into alevin this spring, and then release their young salmon fry in a local creek. The Children's Museum of Skagit County continues to be an amazing host for a Salmon in the Classroom tank as well. The Children's Museum provides community members and younger children the opportunity to watch salmon grow and learn about habitat needs regardless of where they are enrolled in school. This year we have also migrated teachers in our Junior Stream Stewards Program to merge with our Kids in Creeks Program for middle and high schools. It is our belief that by offering two programs rather than three, we will be able to reach more students and ultimately have a larger

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