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March 3, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: Council Members

FROM: Heather Hendrixson

SUBJECT: Briefing on the Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program

BACKGROUND:

Presenter: Femke Freiberg and Alex Mahmoud, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Matthew Schwartz and Daniel Newberry, Bonneville Power Administration

Summary: Presenters will provide an overview of the Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program (CBWTP), including background on the program and how it is implemented. They will also highlight accomplishments and trends in the program over time.

Relevance: The CBWTP is a Council supported project that has been identified as a core measure in every Fish and Wildlife Program since the 1990s. It appears in the draft 2026 Fish and Wildlife Program under the Habitat Strategy as measures HAB 34, Hab 35, and Hab 36.

Workplan: Fish and Wildlife Division work plan 2026; Program Implementation (Support and advocate for program implementation; Tracking); G. Tracking – Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program.

Background: Inadequate streamflow has been identified as a key factor limiting the productivity of both anadromous and resident fish species. Subbasin plans and other habitat

assessments throughout the Columbia Basin describe this limiting factor and identify the need for increasing instream flows to improve fish habitat.

As early as 1991, Fish and Wildlife Programs have called for the use of water transactions to benefit flows for focal fish species. In the 2000 Program, the Council recommended that Bonneville establish a funding agreement for land and water acquisitions. In 2002, Bonneville and the Council established the Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program in response to the 2000 Federal Columbia River Power System Biological Opinion and the Council's 2000 Fish and Wildlife Program. The primary focus of the CBWTP is to fund water transactions that improve streamflow on ecologically significant Columbia Basin tributaries for which flow is a limiting factor.

The CBWTP is administered through a partnership between Bonneville and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF). Implementation of the CBWTP is through qualified local entities (QLEs) – state, local, and tribal agencies and nonprofit organizations that work collaboratively with ranchers, farmers, landowners, and irrigation districts to develop, implement, and monitor voluntary water transactions.

During the presentation, NFWF and BPA will discuss current administration, oversight, and implementation practices of the program in addition to touching in outcomes and the future of the program.

More info: Information about NFWF and the Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program can be found on NFWF's website [here](#). Prior year reports are located under the Program Information tab of the website. The most recent 2024 report can be downloaded [here](#). The Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation Report for Fiscal Year 2024 is located [here](#).

Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program

Northwest Power and Conservation Council Meeting

March 10, 2026



Columbia Basin Water Transactions Program (CBWTP)

A scenic view of a fast-flowing stream or waterfall cascading through a dense forest of evergreen trees. The water is white and turbulent as it flows over rocks, surrounded by lush green foliage and tall, thin tree trunks.

Goal: Maximize voluntary habitat restoration in flow-limited streams critical to the survival of native fish species, while improving resilience of communities throughout the Columbia Basin.

Program Approach:

1. Build Capacity
2. Acquire Water
3. Account for Outcomes

Program Background



1980 NORTHWEST POWER ACT

“The Administrator shall use the Bonneville Power Administration Fund to protect, mitigate, and enhance fish and wildlife affected by the FCRPS.”



ESA listed salmon and steelhead



Listed and unlisted resident fish



Wildlife



ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT, FCRPS BIOLOGICAL OPINIONS

“Each federal agency shall... insure that any action authorized funded, or carried out by such agency is not likely to jeopardize continued existence... of any endangered species.”



TRIBAL TRUST & TREATY PROVISIONS

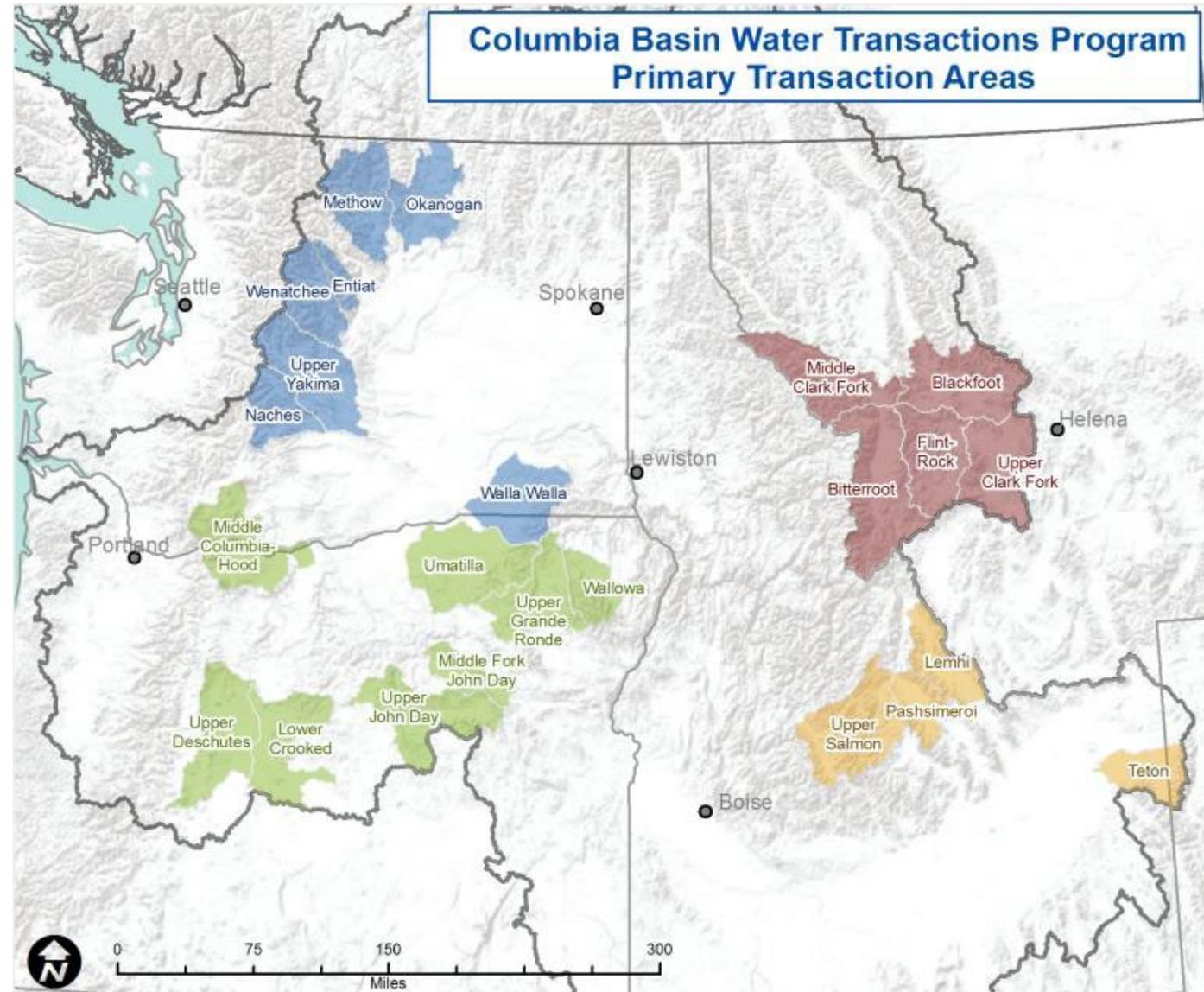
BPA will consult with the Tribal governments prior to BPA taking actions, making decisions, or implementing programs that may affect Tribal resources.



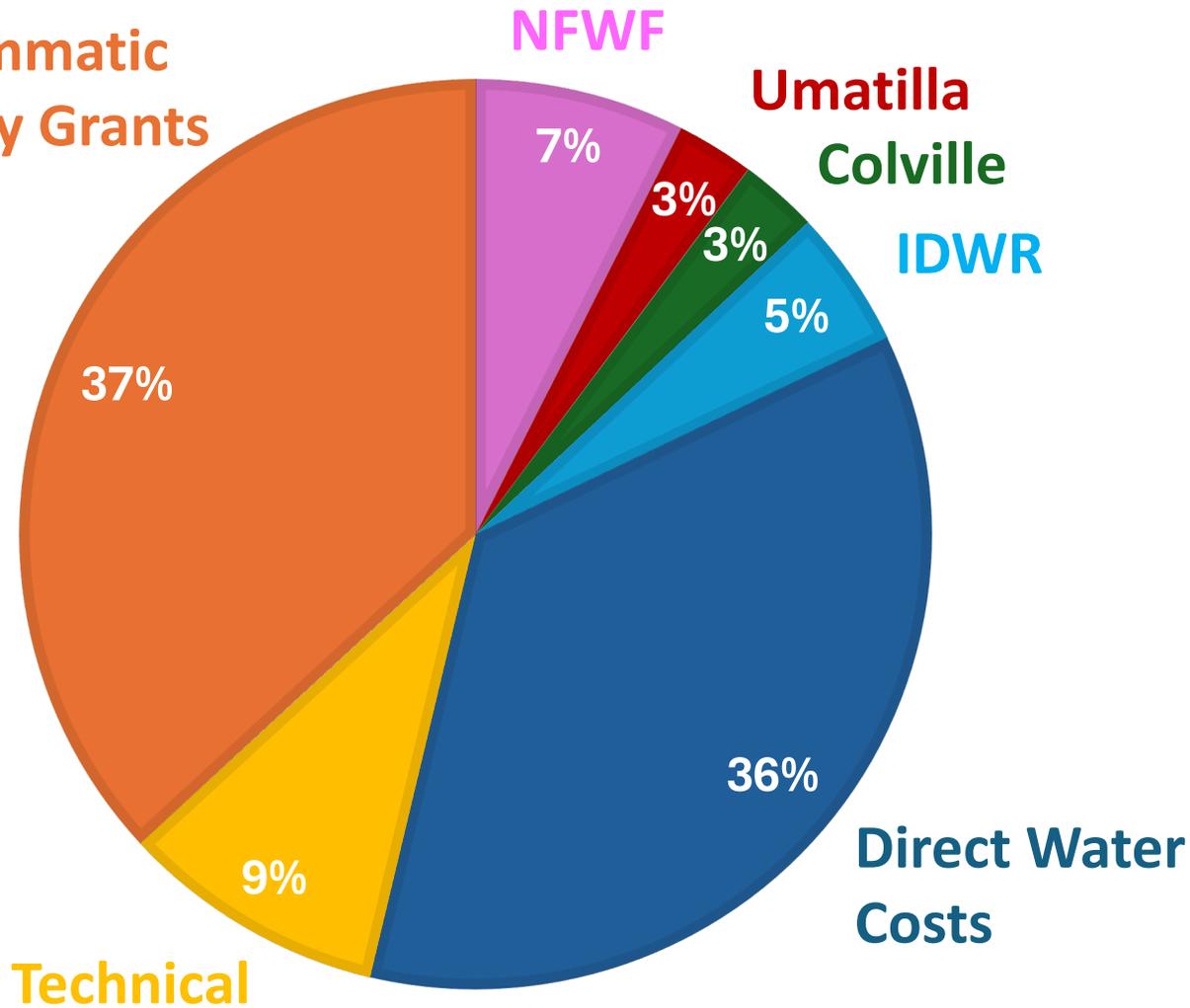
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Species & Geographic Priorities

1. ESA listed salmon and steelhead species.
2. ESA listed resident U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or state species of concern.
3. Other fish or wildlife where a benefit can be tied to increased flows in a specific location.



CBWTP Funding Breakdown



- Water Transaction funding needs to be paired with stable capacity & program infrastructure funding.
- This breakdown is dynamic and open to annual adjustment.



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Program Structure



Bonneville
POWER ADMINISTRATION



NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION
NFWF

Technical Advisory Committee



Northwest **Power** and **Conservation** Council

U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE
NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

FOREST SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

THE CONFEDERATED TRIBES OF THE UMATILLA RESERVATION
1872

Cayuse – Umatilla – Walla Walla
Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

Qualified Local Entities (QLE)

Montana

Washington

Idaho

Oregon



CLARK FORK
COALITION

TROUT
UNLIMITED



TROUT
UNLIMITED

Washington
Department of
FISH and
WILDLIFE

WASHINGTON
WATER TRUST

COUNTY OF
CHELAN



IDAHO
WATER RESOURCE BOARD

NEZ PERCE TRIBE
TREATY OF 1855

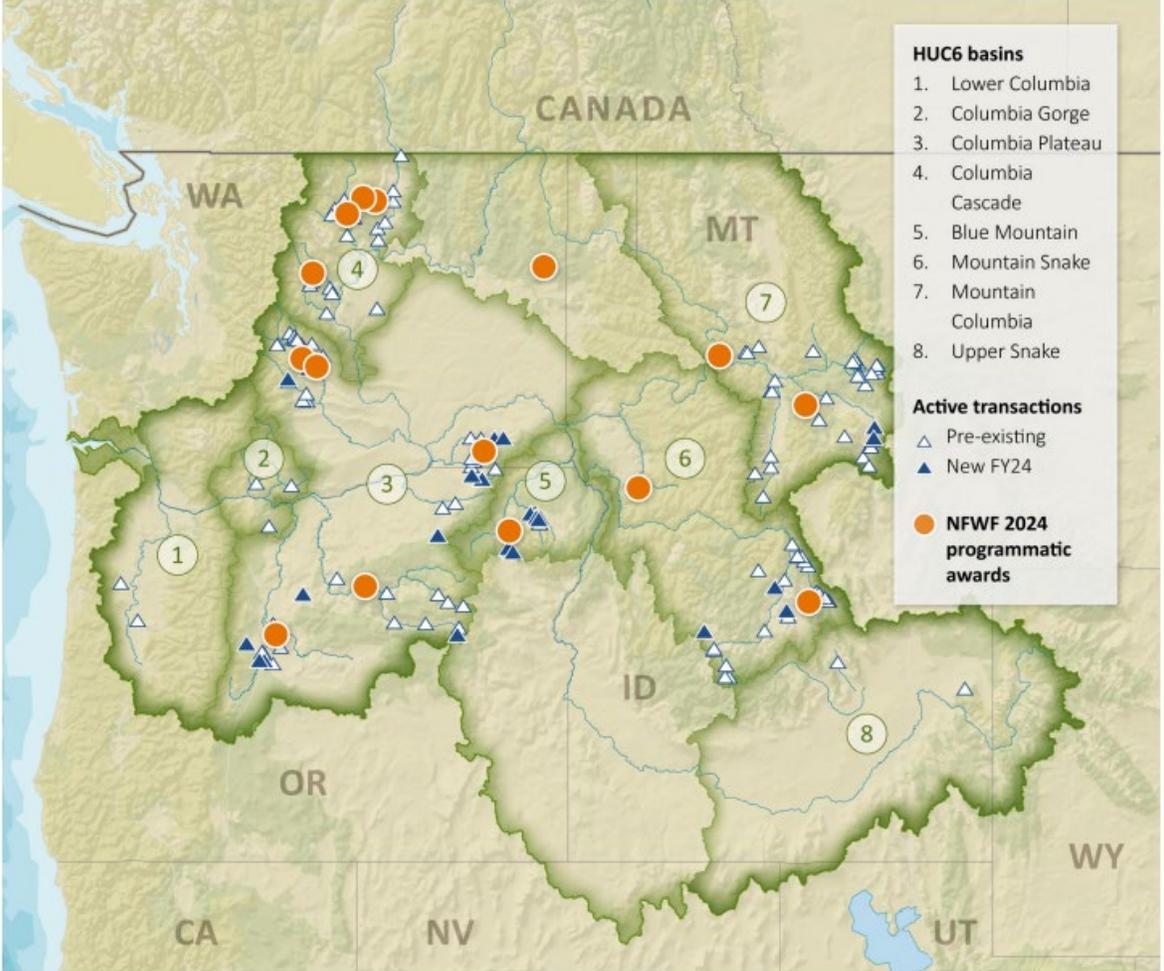
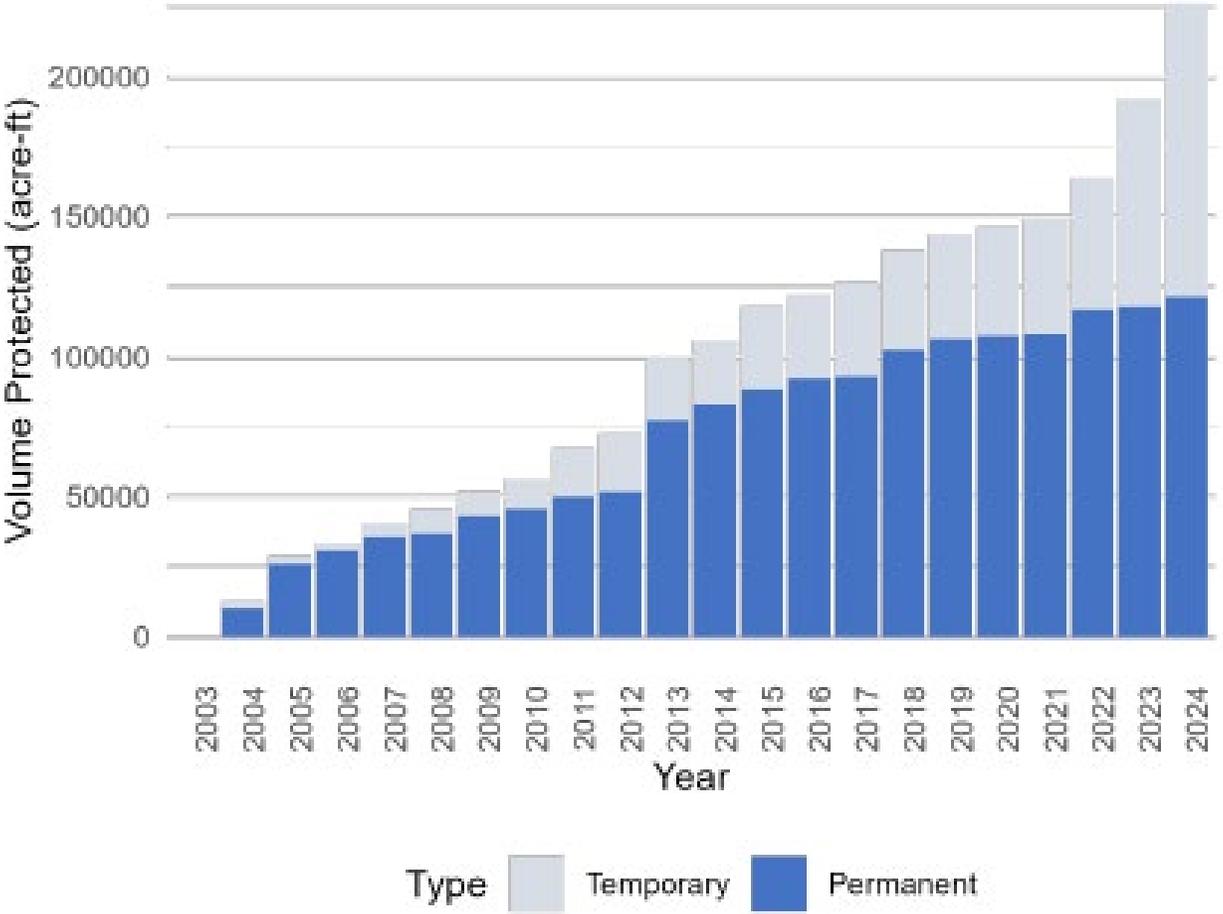


OREGON
Fish & Wildlife

DESCHUTES RIVER
CONSERVANCY

TROUT
UNLIMITED

20+ Years of Steady Progress



Since 2002: 725 water transactions → ~3 million AF protected to date
 → ~14 million AF protected into the future



What is a QLE?

A Qualified Local Entity (QLE) is an organization approved by CBWTP for programmatic funding to:

- 1) Build relationships with local partners and landowners;
- 2) Develop short and long-term water transactions;
- 3) Submit water transaction proposals for review by the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC).

Qualified for 3 years of funding subject to annual performance review.



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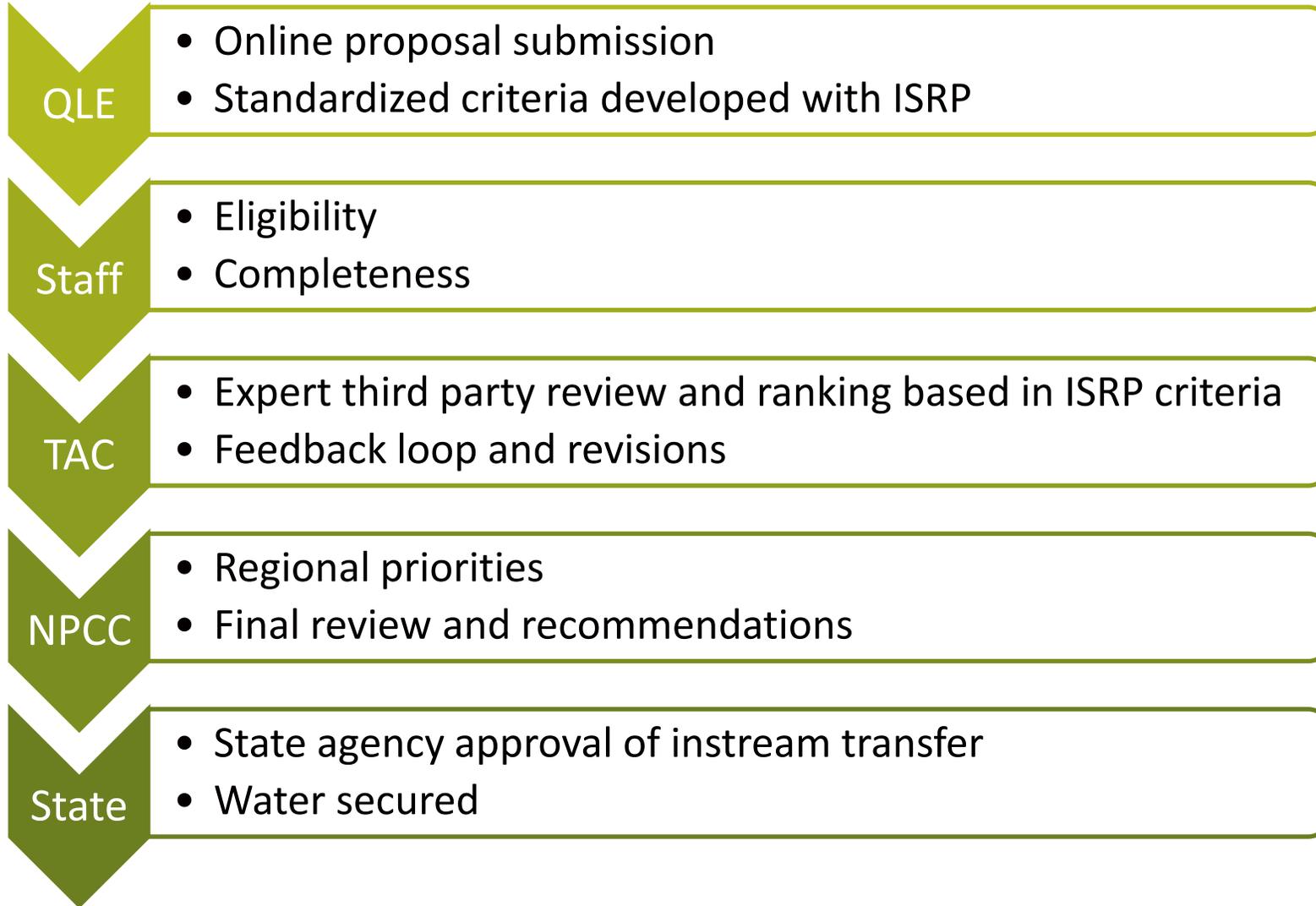
How Do Water Transactions Work?

1. Build trust and understand needs of water rights holder.
2. Find a strategy that works for the individual:
 - Permanent transaction (acquisition).
 - Temporary/short-term transaction (lease).
 - Conserved water (irrigation efficiency).
3. Consult legal, economic, and monitoring experts on transaction terms.
4. Seek state agency approval to protect the water instream.
5. NFWF/BPA funds the transaction.
6. River flows are improved.



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Transaction Proposal Review Process



Monitoring Program

Contractual Compliance:

To support project implementation and streamflow management.

Effectiveness Monitoring:

On priority streams to assess the impacts of restoration work on instream habitats.



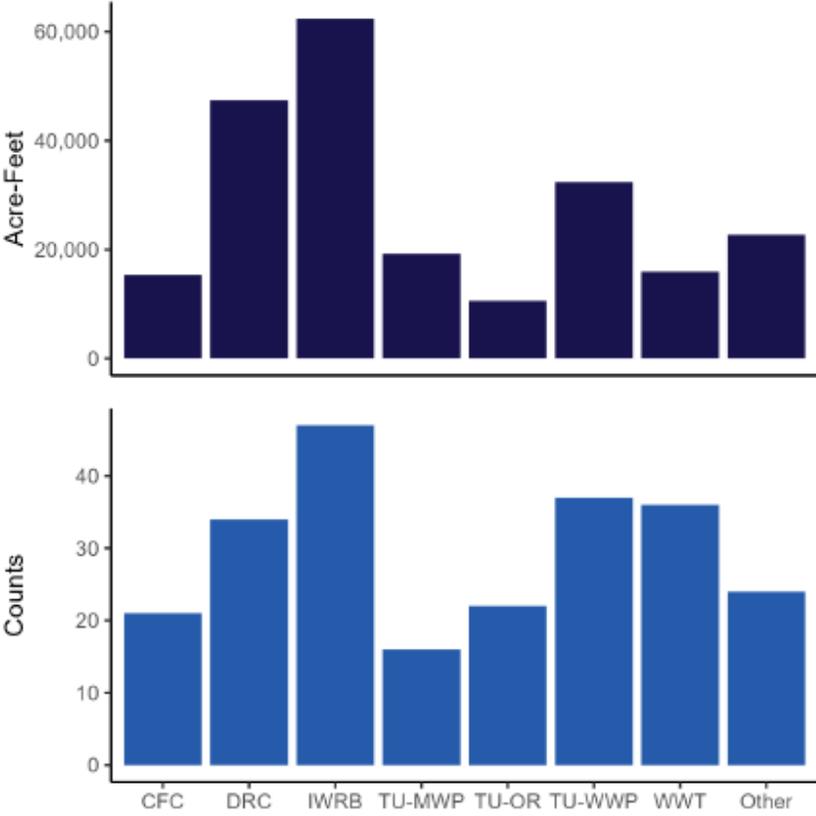
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QLE Activity Per NPCC Province – Active Transactions FY24

Table 1. The Northwest Power and Conservation Council provinces, basins, and subbasins within which each qualified local entity manages water transactions and the total number of transactions and associated acre-feet managed.

QLE	NPCC Province(s)	Basins (HUC-6)	Subbasins (HUC-8)	Total Transactions	Total Volume (acre-feet)
CFC	Mountain Columbia	Pend Oreille	Blackfoot, Middle Clark Fork, Bitterroot, Upper Clark Fork	21	15,316
DRC	Columbia Plateau	Deschutes	Upper Deschutes, Lower Crooked	34	47,426
IWRB	Mountain Snake, Upper Snake	Salmon, Upper Snake	Middle Salmon-Panther, Lemhi, Upper Salmon, Pahsimeroi, Little Lost, Upper Middle Fork Salmon, Teton	47	62,338
TU-MWP	Mountain Columbia	Pend Oreille	Flint-Rock, Blackfoot, Middle Clark Fork, Bitterroot, Upper Clark Fork	16	19,196
TU-OR	Blue Mountain, Columbia Gorge, Columbia Plateau	John Day, Lower Snake, Middle Columbia	Wallowa, Umatilla, Upper Grande Ronde, Upper John Day, Middle Columbia-Hood, Walla Walla	22	10,618
TU-WWP	Columbia Cascade, Columbia Plateau	Upper Columbia, Yakima	Upper Yakima, Naches, Wenatchee, Upper Columbia-Entiat, Methow, Okanogan, Moses Coulee	37	32,383
WWT	Columbia Cascade, Columbia Gorge, Columbia Plateau, Columbia Gorge	Middle Columbia, Upper Columbia, Yakima	Walla Walla, Methow, Upper Yakima, Naches, Klickitat, Okanogan, Middle Columbia-Hood, Upper Columbia-Entiat	36	15,949
Other ¹	Blue Mountain, Columbia Gorge, Columbia Plateau, Lower Columbia	John Day, Lower Snake, Middle Columbia, Willamette	Middle Fork John Day, Umatilla, North Fork John Day, Lower John Day, Upper Willamette, Middle Columbia-Hood, Upper Grande Ronde, Upper John Day, Walla Walla, Wallowa	24	22,717
Totals:				237	225,941

Note:
 1. Other represents a group of active water transactions that were originally brokered by a QLE that is no longer a part of the CBWTP.



Note: Other represents water transactions that are instream, but not actively managed by a current qualified local entity.
 Figure 2. Number of transactions (counts) and total acre-feet (acre-feet) managed by each qualified local entity in fiscal year 2024.



Connecting the Dots Between Flow and Fish

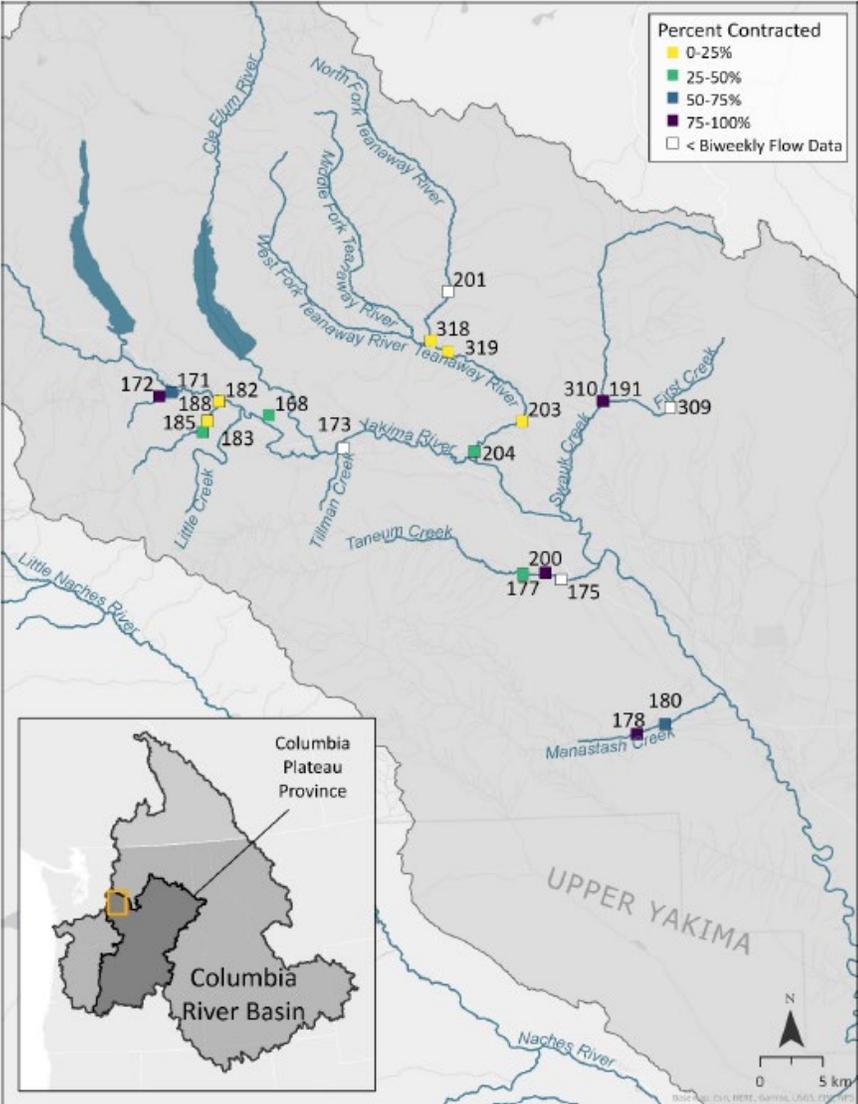


Figure 10. Instream flow monitoring locations for active water transactions in the Upper Yakima Subbasin colored by the average summer (July to September) percentage of observed flows that were contracted in 2024.

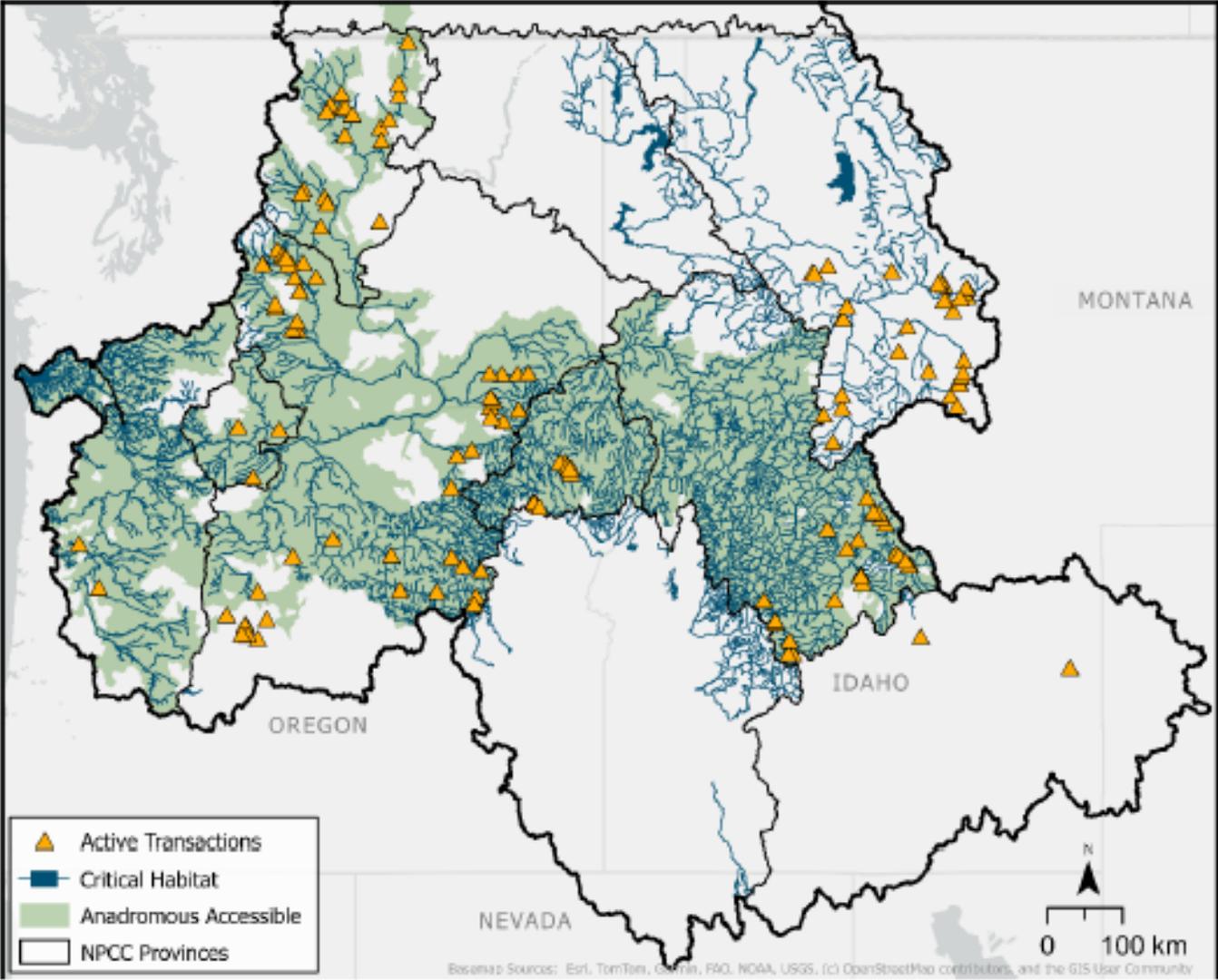


Figure 6. Combined map of critical habitat for Endangered Species Act-listed Chinook Salmon, Chum Salmon, Coho Salmon, Sockeye Salmon, steelhead, White Sturgeon, and Bull Trout.

Bringing Rivers Back to Life



Loup Loup Creek in Washington has been transformed from a dry creek bed with no fish in many years into one of the most productive steelhead streams in the Okanogan Basin.

Bringing Rivers Back to Life

Racetrack Creek, Montana



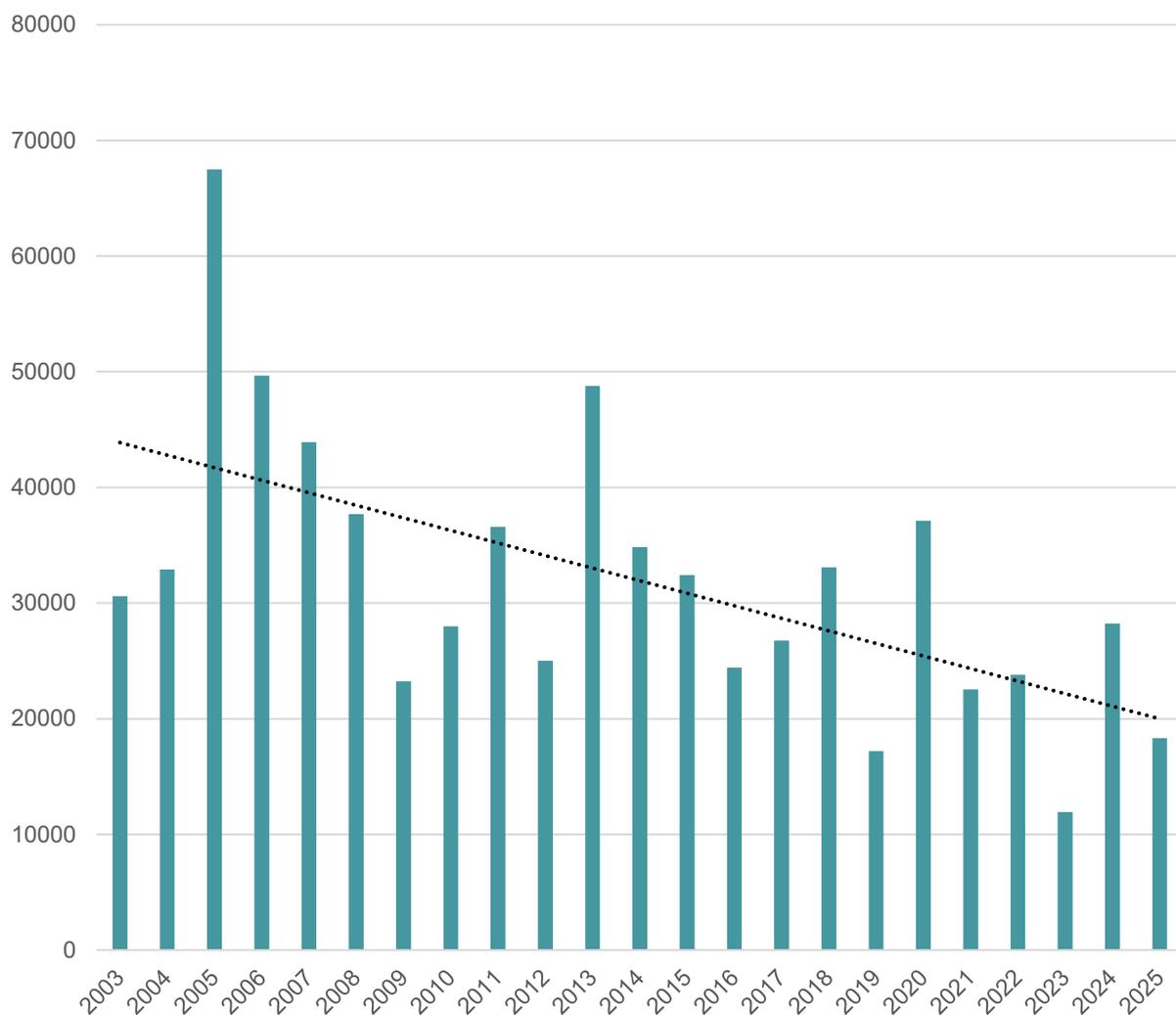
Pole Creek, Idaho



Every drop of water pictured was secured through a water transaction. This represents 98 independent transactions – a mix of permanent, temporary and conserved water.

Challenges

New Acre/Feet Transacted per Year



- After 22 years, many of the easy transactions have been completed. Many landowners in target areas have been contacted.
- States have other players creating a competitive marketplace.
- Need to build new partnerships with other agencies and organizations to leverage resources.



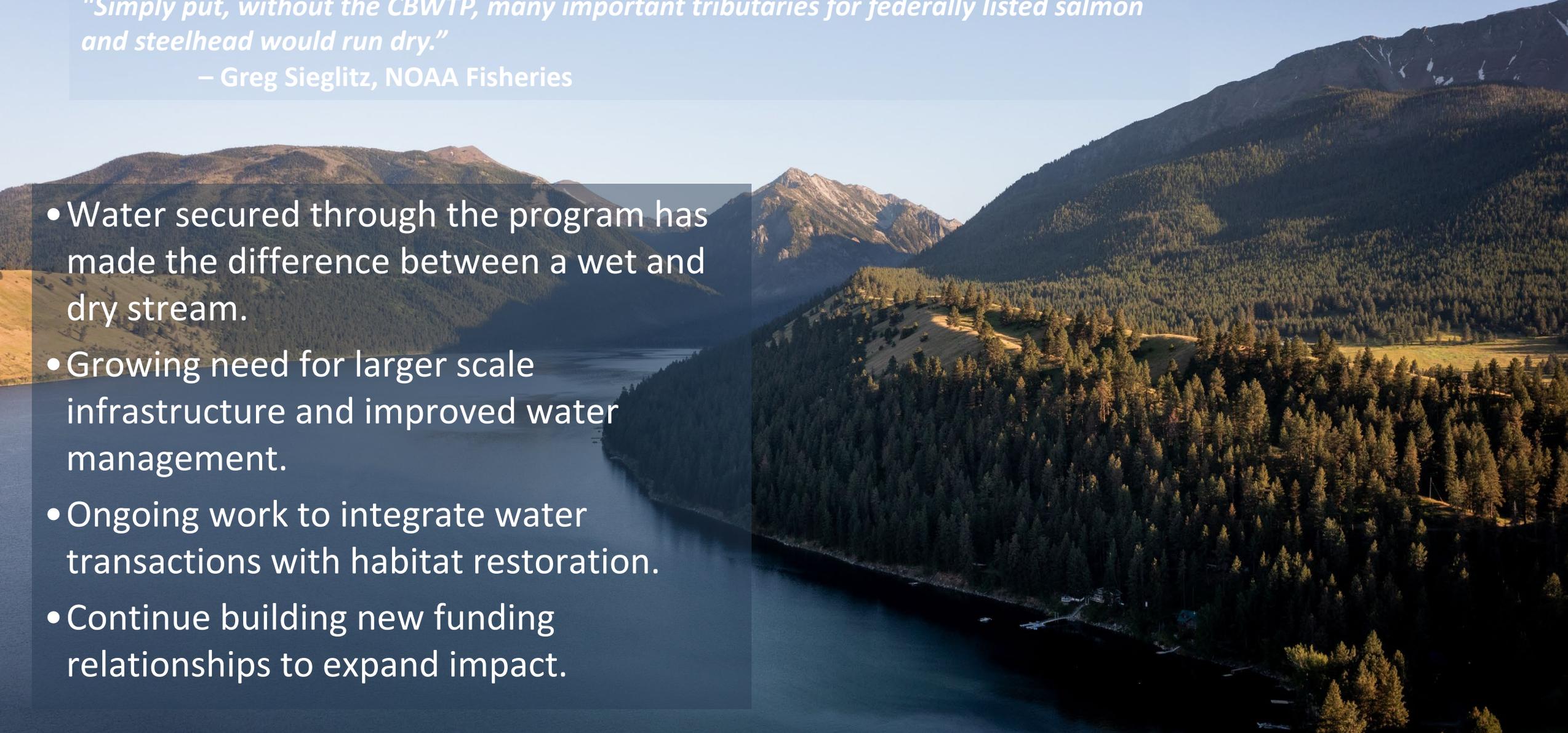
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Looking Ahead

"Simply put, without the CBWTP, many important tributaries for federally listed salmon and steelhead would run dry."

– Greg Sieglitz, NOAA Fisheries

- Water secured through the program has made the difference between a wet and dry stream.
- Growing need for larger scale infrastructure and improved water management.
- Ongoing work to integrate water transactions with habitat restoration.
- Continue building new funding relationships to expand impact.





Questions?

