

Beavers reintroduced to southwest Oregon to restore wetlands

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Juliet Grable / JPR

In February, over a dozen beaver enthusiasts donned snowshoes and filed to a headwaters creek in southwest Oregon to watch as five beavers were introduced to their new home.

One by one, the furry rodents clambered out of cloth bags and slid down the snowy bank into the frigid water.

The release marks a milestone for the Vesper Meadow Education Program, which has been rehabilitating wet meadow habitat on private land nearby.

Experts and volunteers have spent the past six years setting the table for beavers, said Jeanine Moy, Vesper Meadow's program director. "We've been partnering with state federal agencies as well as local nonprofits, school groups, artists, independent biologists to get the ecosystem to the point where beavers could come back."

Beaver dams and activity can help store water, improve water quality, boost biodiversity, and even create firebreaks. But the loss of these "ecosystem engineers," along with cattle grazing, water diversions and logging, have degraded wet mountain

meadows.

To reverse the damage, volunteers have worked to make the area more beaver-friendly.

They have planted hundreds of willow stakes — a favorite beaver food — and helped Project Beaver install dozens of structures in area creeks on both public and private land. Constructed with small-diameter trees and branches, these structures emulate beaver dams and activity, helping to slow down and retain water.

“We’re just packing the wound in the sense that waterways have collapsed into these gashes in the landscape,” said Jakob Shockey, executive director of Project Beaver. “By packing the wound, we help slow the force of the water in such a way that beavers can go in there and take over.”

State legislation to protect beavers

In Oregon, as elsewhere, beavers were widely trapped for their fur and killed as “nuisance animals” that caused flooding and killed trees. Now, wildlife managers are recognizing beavers as a “keystone species” whose activity can improve the health and resilience of ecosystems.

Oregon lawmakers have introduced several bills recognizing the beaver’s important role. HB 3464, passed in 2023, reclassified beavers from predatory animals to furbearers on private land. Under the new law, landowners can still kill beavers, but they must obtain a permit and report their “take” to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

A new bill, [HB 3143](#), builds on this legislation, said state Rep. Pam Marsh, whose district includes southern Jackson County. The bill, which enjoys broad bipartisan support, would create a fund to help landowners deploy non-lethal tools like fencing or tree wrapping to deter beavers.

“What we’re trying to do with all this beaver legislation is to help beavers do their thing, to our benefit,” Marsh said. “If we want [landowners] to look at other options, we should provide some support for doing that.”

These students are building dams over the summer — with hopes to lure beavers back

Landowners kill hundreds, if not thousands, of “nuisance” beavers every year. The beavers released in February were lucky: Project Beaver rescued them from a ditch in the Gold Hill Irrigation District. Shockey said funding could have paid for flow devices

that keep beaver dams from completely blocking (and flooding) a waterway and allowed the beaver family to stay in Gold Hill.

A second bill, HB 3932, would prohibit the hunting or trapping beavers on public land where the state has deemed the waterways “impaired.”

Shockey said protecting beavers on public land could help safeguard investments in beaver-based restoration.

Many of the streams Project Beaver has targeted for restoration once hosted beavers; now, most of the colonies have disappeared.

The day of the release, Shockey and volunteers left apples, carrots and willow cuttings for the beavers to snack on. While there’s no guarantee the family will stay in the area, Moy hopes they become partners in bringing back the wet meadow ecosystem.

“I certainly hope they stay and it’s a good home for them,” she said. “It could be really wondrous for just carrying on the restoration work that we’ve started.”

Both Vesper Meadow and Project Beaver recently lost federal funding for their restoration projects. Moy says they will likely scale back their ambitions for this year, but they will still work with volunteers to plant more willows and shore up beaver structures at Vesper Meadow this summer. She believes their project can help other landowners who want to partner with beavers.

“I hope to set as a model and provide information about how to do that as a resource for other conservation groups or landowners, land managers, and just really demonstrate some best practices in being in relation with the land,” she said.

Juliet Grable is a reporter with Jefferson Public Radio. This story comes to you from the Northwest News Network, a collaboration between public media organizations in Oregon and Washington.

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