WATER 4: CONSERVING WET MEADOWS AND WATER IN WAYS THAT MATTER TO PEOPLE

The Water 4 program is now in its fifth year and has grown from an IWJV initiative to a well-established and broadly recognized conservation approach for sustaining wetlands. Water 4 is recognized at the highest levels of government and is increasingly directing new investments from key agencies to support locally led conservation efforts. This support is allowing the Water 4 partnership to make headway against conservation challenges, even as drought and climate change fundamentally alter the valuable wetland and irrigated agricultural lands of the West.

ACCELERATING THE PACE AND SCALE OF CONSERVATION BY:

- Producing groundbreaking science on wetland resiliency and the migration of indicator bird species.
- Formulating new ways to connect science to work on the ground.
- Innovatively addressing field delivery capacity needs.
- Disseminating compelling multimedia communications.
- Building new partnerships and fostering deeper relationships with existing partners.

THE WATER 4 TOOLBOX

- Conservation Easements
- Modernization of Flood Irrigation Infrastructure
- Reconnecting Rivers to Floodplains
- Wet Meadow Restoration
- Low-Tech Restoration
- Supporting Management of Public Wetlands

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In 2022, Water 4 partners in the Bear River Watershed were awarded $7.85 million in funding from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

The Bear River Watershed Agriculture and Habitat Connectivity project covers areas of Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming. Utah's Bear River Land Conservancy and a coalition of 14 partners, including the Sagebrush Steppe Land Trust and Trout Unlimited, will use the funding to combine conservation easements and land management activities to protect and connect terrestrial, riparian, and aquatic habitats and to preserve working lands as a viable component of the landscape.

IWJV wetland and migratory bird science will be used to identify projects and measure the landscape-scale impact of activities under the RCPP.

PARTNER PROFILE: THE BEAR RIVER LAND CONSERVANCY

The Bear River Land Conservancy (BRLC) was founded in 2011 to manage and steward a 455-acre floodplain property in Cache County, Utah, called the "Bear River Bottoms."

Since then, the BRLC has helped to protect nearly 500 acres of Bear River floodplain and grazing land, 30 acres of farmland with a threatened species of orchid, and a quarter-mile of Bear Lake shoreline. With the help of its partners in Utah, as well as in Wyoming and Idaho, the BRLC’s impact is only growing.

The IWJV is supporting the BRLC with science and capacity.

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In 2022, Water 4 scaled up its efforts to share new science that links wetland drying to migratory patterns of key waterbird species in California and Oregon. This includes the production and distribution of *Intermountain Insights* articles across the IWJV partnership network, as well as targeted presentations to partners and other stakeholders.

Sharing the wetland drying science and the *Wetland Evaluation Tool* gives land managers additional tools to leverage their local knowledge to create a landscape-scale picture of important areas to prioritize for land and water conservation.

### A NEW, MULTI-YEAR IBIS STUDY IS UNDERWAY

In 2022, the IWJV, U.S. Geological Survey, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Migratory Birds program launched a new multi-year study to fit White-Faced Ibis with transmitters on active breeding colonies in California, Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon, to track seasonal movement patterns responsive to wetland drying.

White-Faced Ibis, a wading bird reliant on wetlands throughout its annual cycle, serves a key role in marking ecologically valuable wetland systems on both public and private land. Identifying wetland systems important to ibis will dictate the wetlands of highest conservation priority at a spatial scale that is relevant to other migratory birds.

*This project was only possible through partnerships with USFWS National Wildlife Refuge staff in California, Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon; the Idaho Department of Fish and Game; and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources.*

Researchers fit a white-faced ibis with a GPS device at a banding session at Mud Lake, Idaho, in summer 2022.
PARTNERSHIP EMPHASIZES FUNDING & CAPACITY

In 2020, the Colorado State Office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the IWJV entered into an interagency agreement to expand field delivery capacity in the state.

Three years later, this partnership has seen the successful completion of three rounds of TCP funding (see right), science and communications support for statewide work that is relevant to Water 4 goals, and burgeoning new partnerships in northwestern Colorado.

WORKING WITH NRCS TO SUPPORT PARTNERS IN COLORADO
NRCS COLORADO INVESTMENTS

The IWJV’s wetland resiliency science was used to support an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)-funded Targeted Conservation Program (TCP) focusing on flood irrigation infrastructure projects in the Upper Rio Grande watershed over a three-year period (2019–2022).

This TCP directed funds to sustain agricultural practices such as flood irrigation that provide benefits to migratory birds and other wildlife. For more information on the TCP, this article documents the program’s wild success over three years of funding in the San Luis Valley and how the work has impacted the local partnership.

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All these communities are so deeply connected to the river and because these projects really make a difference in improving the health and resiliency of the river, they make a huge difference in improving the health and resiliency of the San Luis Valley.

Emma Reesor,
Executive Director
Rio Grande Headwaters Restoration Project

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Investments from the Montana State Office of the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) are enabling the IWJV to support capacity that enhances NGO and landowner collaboration with NRCS offices in important Western Montana landscapes.

BLACKFOOT VALLEY

For two decades, Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited's Ryen Neudecker has worked tirelessly to bridge the gap between the need to jump administrative hurdles and enacting meaningful restoration work along tributaries of Montana's famed Blackfoot River.

NRCS investments mean that Ryen's capacity to carry out on-the-ground work has significantly increased, **without BBCTU needing to create and find funding for a new position.**

MISSION VALLEY

IWJV science, including the [Wetland Evaluation Tool (WET)](https://iwjv.org/water), has demonstrated the overall resiliency and importance of wetlands in Montana's Mission Valley.

Liam O'Connor, Coordinating Wetlands Biologist/Habitat Specialist for Pheasants Forever, is working across boundaries in the valley's patchwork of land ownership to conserve these wetlands. Partnering with other entities to support his position is one way that Water 4 ensures the resilience of the Mission Valley.

BITTERROOT VALLEY

The Bitter Root Water Forum works exclusively in the Bitterroot Watershed to enact community-driven restoration and learning initiatives that support traditions of community, agriculture, and recreation.

An initial investment from Water 4 in 2022 is helping the Bitter Root Water Forum develop relationships and projects that support NRCS priorities and landscape-scale conservation.

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PUTTING WET TO WORK

In 2022, IWJV staff worked to integrate stakeholder feedback into the Wetland Evaluation Tool (WET), driving the development of interactive modules that allow users to quantify changes in surface water, hydroperiods, and wetland resilience in areas of interest over space and time. The evolution of WET in 2022 allowed the IWJV to work with partners across the West to identify critical migratory bird habitat for conservation.

WET AROUND THE WEST

- WET informed a Utah NRCS Strategic Fund Pool specifically for enhancing flood irrigation infrastructure in Rich County, in the Bear River Watershed.
- Colorado NRCS used WET to help inform candidate selection for flood irrigation infrastructure improvement projects in a Targeted Conservation Program in the San Luis Valley.

NRCS CALIFORNIA: WET + WRE

The IWJV worked with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in California in 2022 to use WET to inform outreach to boost enrollment in the Wetland Reserve Easement program (WRE) in northeastern California. Outreach efforts included:

- Feature articles profiling different types of WRE enrollees.
- A storymap providing information about WRE in California.
- Postcards to landowners who steward important wetlands.
- Regionally targeted social media advertising.
In response to a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) request for comment on the application of Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding to climate-smart agricultural (CSA) practices, S2I staff produced a summary resource response to how CSA funds should be applied in western landscapes in order to avoid greenhouse gas emissions and sequester carbon.

In the vast and relatively intact landscapes of the Intermountain West, protecting stored soil carbon is crucial in the fight against climate change. This can be achieved through conservation easements that protect wetlands and native rangelands, water management activities that prevent wetland drying, restoration of mesic habitats, and tools that strengthen the fight against invasive species.

This information was shared widely as a scientifically sound and ecologically based resource for partners as they also navigated the IRA CSA issues.
The Southern Oregon–Northeastern California (SONEC) region and the Klamath Basin are imperiled by wetland loss and drying. A landmark interagency agreement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Oregon enables partners in this globally significant region to combat these declines.

Funding from NRCS and the USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program supports three capacity positions in the Klamath Falls, Lakeview, and Harney Basin NRCS Field Offices to accelerate the conservation of working wet meadows on private land. NRCS Oregon investments in other programs are helping partners work across private-public land boundaries to confront the challenges faced in this region.

KLAMATH RCPP GAINS MOMENTUM

In 2022, Ducks Unlimited, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the IWJV put the NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) to work in the Klamath Basin. The Klamath Basin Farming and Wetland Collaborative RCPP, awarded in 2021, is aimed at helping to offset wetland habitat losses on public lands.

Private lands sustain some of the last remaining managed wetlands in the Klamath Basin. Programs funded by the RCPP—like Walking Wetlands—enable these private lands to continue maintaining the limited wetland habitats available to Pacific Flyway birds. This RCPP is the first phase of a larger effort recognizing USFWS contributions in the Klamath Basin.

“...The capacity we have collectively built through Interagency Agreements with Oregon NRCS has moved the needle for wetland habitat conservation on working ranchlands in the SONEC region and served as a catalyst for partnerships with NRCS in other states in the West.

Dave Smith, IWJV Coordinator

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THE POWER OF IWJV COMMUNICATIONS

EXPANDING THE REACH OF THE IWJV PARTNERSHIP

In 2022 Water 4 used communications to build relationships with new partners and strengthen existing partnerships. Communications efforts included:

- Natural Resources Conservation Service California Wetland Reserve Easement outreach
- Yakama Nation wetland tour and article
- Bear River Journalist Workshop (see right)
- Colorado Trout Unlimited Conservation Innovation Grant article
- Intermountain West Shorebird Survey communications support

SHARING THE STORY OF THE BEAR RIVER WATERSHED

In fall 2022, the IWJV led a four-day Journalist Workshop touring the Bear River Watershed throughout Utah, Wyoming, and Idaho.

Twelve journalists representing the Salt Lake Tribune, Wyoming Public Radio, Smithsonian magazine, Outdoor Life, Utah Public Radio, On Land magazine, Ducks Unlimited publications, and Western Farm Press, along with freelancers, attended this four-day event. Speakers from Wyoming, Utah, and Idaho represented the Utah Division of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (both Refuges and the Partners Program), Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Bureau of Land Management, private landowners, Sagebrush Steppe Land Trust, River Newe, and Ducks Unlimited.

See the IWJV’s images from this event here. Read a storymap about the event and the resulting press here.
EMPOWERING LAND TRUSTS FOR LANDSCAPE-SCALE SUCCESSES

Supporting land trusts with science, funding, and capacity enables them to better work across boundaries and better serve landowners and local communities. More strategic conservation easements mean more landscape-scale benefits for people, wildlife, native fish, and migratory birds.

In 2022, Water 4 strengthened its relationships with local and regional land trusts across the West by:

- Elevating the importance of conservation easements to both local and high-level audiences.
- Using the Wetland Evaluation Tool to help land trusts support and prioritize conservation easements.
- Working with a broad network of land trusts to build partnerships and cross-boundary collaboration.
- Supporting capacity building to accelerate the pace of private land conservation.

“Water 4's engagement with land trusts not only allows for better landscape-scale conservation, but it also enables land trusts to better serve landowners and communities.”

Erik Glenn
Executive Director, Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust
President, Partnership of Rangeland Trusts
IWJV Management Board Member
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