The Nature Conservancy is committed to conservation within the South Sound region and the Willamette Valley /Puget Trough/Georgia Basin ecoregion. The Conservancy will continue to perform outstanding stewardship, protect key conservation parcels and promote a conservation community of cooperative partners.

Prairie Restoration with a Changing Climate

Have you wondered how trajectories for prairie restoration will vary as our climate changes? Well, University of Oregon researchers Bart Johnson and Scott Bridgham have initiated an experiment to investigate that question. Sited at three Nature Conservancy Preservesin Oregon and Washington, including Tenalquot Prairie in South Sound, the researchers are physically altering soil temperatures and precipitation on the prairies while tracking the success of restoration efforts. This includes heating experimental plots on the prairie with arrays of infrared lamps and adding precipitation. The project uses standardized restoration practices pioneered through the Conservancy funded Collins Prairie Restoration Project, which also spanned the Oregon and Washington prairies.

Sarah Hamman recently spent time in the field with the researchers, helping install the experimental plots and discussing the integration of soil processes into the experiment. Bart and Scott agreed that Sarah's expertise and ideas would strengthen the project and additional funding from the project will be coming to the South Sound Program to help Sarah track the response of soil microbial communities and nutrient dynamics. Look for the installation of a heat lamp array in early 2010. For more info see http://pmr.uoregon.edu/science-and-innovation/uo-research-news/research-news-2008/october-2008/northwest-climate-change-is-target-of-3-2-million-in-grants-to-uo/

Seeding the Prairie

High-quality prairie in the South Sound is exemplified by high plant diversity, especially a bounty of wildflowers. A spring walk through such prairie is a real treat, with different flowers seen at every step. Restoring degraded prairie to such condition is a multi-step challenge that in the past was limited by the ability to seed large amounts of prairie. The Conservancy has been increasing the amount of seed available for restoration for some time. Previous trials direct seeding Roemer's fescue have proven quite effective, especially after prescribed fire has helped prepare the soil.

Conservancy staff working the seed drill, restoring the Glacial Heritage Preserve.

This quarter The Conservancy initiated a new set of experimental seeding trials with both fescue and prairie forbs. Using a seed drill, trials were installed over multiple acres at McChord Air Force Base, Tenalquot Prairie and Glacial Heritage. Make sure to visit some of these areas next spring, when we hope thousands of seedling grasses and wildflowers will be helping improve prairie quality over large portions of these prairies.

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Prairie Conservation

Prison Sustainability Project Successful - The propagation of prairie plants through Evergreen State College's Prison Sustainability Project has successfully produced the first crop of prairie plants. Over 100,000 plugs of prairie forbs and grasses were grown by inmates at Stafford Creek Correctional Center, with technical assistance provided by the Conservancy. These plants are now on their way to Ft. Lewis to help establish prairie seed plots – generating new seed for restoring Fort prairies in the future.

Restoring our prairies to high-quality with high diversity of wildflowers is a goal of several TNC projects this quarter.

Fall Plantings Create Butterfly Habitat – Preparing prairies to receive translocations of rare butterflies is a continuing conservation priority. This fall, additional plantings of specific prairie forbs have enhanced priority sites on and off of Ft. Lewis. These sites are the best locations for future butterfly translocations. Coordinated and partially funded through the Army Compatible Use Buffer Program, these sites will hopefully soon become recipients for Taylor's checkerspot and other rare butterflies.

Oak Conservation

Oak Restoration Helps Western Gray Squirrels – This fall Sanders Freed and the WA Conservation Corps crew continued the Conservancy's efforts to restore oak woodlands on Ft. Lewis. They targeted two priority oak stands, near Bill Lake and Lake Debalon, both within known gray squirrel use areas. The stands were overgrown in Scotch broom, limiting the open understory that squirrels prefer. Broom also increases fire fuel loads and intensity that increases the risk of catastrophic fire. Unfortunately, both locations are also inaccessible to our tractors, so Sanders and the WCC crew attacked broom the old-fashion way, by strapping on brushcutters and controlling the broom plant by plant. Recent telemetry work on squirrels by WA Dept. of Fish and Wildlife has shown similar habitat restored by the Conservancy is heavily used by western gray squirrels. Broom control is a first step towards enhancing these patches of habitat. Future work will continue broom control, transplant squirrel food species and create cavities for squirrel nesting.

Cooperative Conservation

Prairie Landowners Handbook – Helping private owners of prairielands restore and manage their properties is a conservation strategy that has received less than optimal attention in the South Sound. The production of a Handbook for Prairie Landowners should help improve that situation. Recently, Laurel Carver of the Conservancy has taken over, and jumpstarted the development of such a handbook with funding from US Fish and Wildlife. Working with partners from a variety of agencies and organizations, Laurel is integrating information for a range of prairie owners. The handbook will assist those with working, residential or natural prairielands. The handbook will help owners identify and assess their prairie, summarize best management practices for prairie maintenance and restoration including monitoring and provide resources and links for further information and expertise. Staff from Adolfson Associates has agreed to assist with editing and formatting of the handbook, a great new addition to the project. Look for a completed handbook in June.