

Teens creating wetland through Oregon Youth Employment Initiative

August 21, 8:41 AM - Lane County Political Buzz Examiner - Dana Magliari

On the edge of a landfill a few miles southeast of Eugene, ten Lane County teens, aged 16-19, are helping convert a former rye-growing field into the Quamash Prairie Wetlands.

They've cut down cattails and planted camas bulbs and slough grass to restore the native plant habitat. They've built perches for hawks and eagles to control the exploding population of voles (mouse to rat-sized rodents) that would devour the native plants if unchecked. A habitat in the making. *Photos right and below: Dana Magliari*



They've also built boxes for owls and kestrels in preparation for the release of 6 of each bird into the area. To hunt more voles. I caught up with them one afternoon as they were attaching one of the owl boxes to a tree.

"I definitely find the job interesting," said Zach, a 17-year-old student at Sheldon High School in Eugene. This job, he said, is what he'll remember most about his summer vacation. That's quite an endorsement coming from a guy who admits he's "not motivated to do stuff."

The only thing he'd change is all the restrictions ("I can't take my gloves off even to put on sunscreen"). Then there are the directives from the crew leader, who shouts out instructions that are already being followed: "Helmets on! Gloves on! Hold the ladder!"

Welcome to the working world Zach.



For many of these teenagers, including Zach, it's their first job. They're working for the Eugene-based Northwest Youth Corps, but their positions are funded through a grant from the Oregon Youth Employment Initiative (OYEI). The grant includes \$150,000 of federal stimulus money.

Five such grants (one from the Oregon Youth Conservation Corps) have enabled Northwest Youth Corps to employ 50 teenagers and 10 adult crew leaders for five summer projects around the state. Overall, the

OYEI funds conservation-related summer projects in each of Oregon's 36 counties, through grants to various youth employment agencies.

Tom Evans is the program director overseeing all five Northwest Youth Corps projects, collectively called the Outdoor Oregon Program. He also seems to be their biggest fan. "This is stimulus money well-spent," he effused, a great choice to showcase "if President Obama ever needs a poster project for the stimulus package." He added that the young adults (he won't call them kids) get active, learn teamwork, and develop a sense of stewardship for the land.

Unlike other Northwest Youth Corps programs that entail living away from home for several weeks, the Outdoor Oregon Program provides day jobs. The—participants—go home at night. "We were worried that some of them wouldn't come back," Evans said.

And in fact, he admitted, some didn't. Some of the crew members I met on the job site joined the program late, seizing an opportunity created by someone else's departure. (The significance of living in a recession—what with its fierce competition for precious few jobs and all that—may not be this age group's biggest concern. But hey, the program can't teach everything.)

But thanks to the kids—or young adults—who *have* showed up for work, this former rye field that once supplied dirt for the landfill will be a functional, thriving wetland someday.