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October 6, 2026

MEMORANDUM

TO: **Council Members**

FROM: **Heather Hendrixson**

SUBJECT: **Update from Project #1992-026-01, Grande Ronde Model Watershed, an Umbrella project.**

BACKGROUND:

Presenter: Jesse Steele, Executive Director, Grande Ronde Model Watershed (GRMW)

Summary: Jesse will provide an update and overview of this project that coordinates watershed planning activities within the Grande Ronde River and Imnaha River subbasins of northeast Oregon and southeast Washington. The watershed activities are focused on habitat protection and restoration and are generally designed to enhance salmon and steelhead and other native fishes, while encouraging and supporting land and water management, economics, and multiple land uses consistent with sound ecosystem management.

Relevance: Project #1992-026-01, *Grande Ronde Model Watershed* (GRMW) is one of the seven umbrella[1] habitat projects supported by the Fish and Wildlife Program. The project uses a comprehensive watershed management approach, using structured and science-based decision tools to enhance implementation of on the ground activities, resolve conflicts, and formulate priorities for action.

[1] see page 2 for information regarding the Program's umbrella projects.

Workplan: Fish and Wildlife Division work plan 2026; Program planning & coordination.

Background: The GRMW serves as the primary coordinating entity for natural resource management in the Grande Ronde and Imnaha subbasins, also functioning as the watershed council in the same geography. The GRMW formed in 1992 and was designated Oregon's model watershed by Governor Roberts in response to the Council's call for "locally-based, bottom-up, voluntary" habitat restoration and "comprehensive watershed management" due to declining salmon and steelhead populations. Action agencies, BPA, and BOR, continue to focus funding on the Grande Ronde Basin as directed under the Fish and Wildlife Program and the 2020 Columbia River System Biological Opinion. GRMW provides the strategy for investing those resources. The GRMW Board of Directors represents a wide array of local interests and provides a means for community input into resource management and recovery of salmon and steelhead.

The GRMW program focuses on ecosystem restoration, coordination, and outreach on private and public lands to promote species recovery. The role of the GRMW is to prioritize, select, review, and fund habitat protection and restoration projects to benefit ESA listed salmon and other fishes in the Grande Ronde and Imnaha subbasins.

As a model watershed, the GRMW was designed to serve as an example for the establishment of watershed management partnerships among local residents, state and federal agency staff, and public interest groups concerned with the management of a watershed at a locally-based level to improve coordination, integration, and implementation to effectively protect and restore fish and wildlife habitat, improve water supply and quality, and foster community development within the region.

Umbrella Projects

Umbrella projects are subsets of the habitat projects currently being implemented through the Program. The seven umbrella projects under the Program are unique because of their coordination role in offering a solicitation and review process that can fund local entities to implement habitat projects. The funding, review, and selection process functions like a grant program for the area. The science review that would normally occur through an Independent Science Review Panel (ISRP) review occurs at the local level with ISRP-reviewed criteria and local technical teams. While the processes differ slightly in each area, the umbrella projects are largely defined by their approach to: 1) serve as a coordinating entity among sponsors in a particular sub-region to identify, review, and select projects; 2) use a formal project solicitation process; and 3) allocate and administer Bonneville funds to other entities for implementation.

As part of the Geographic Category Review in 2013, the Council formalized and established a set of principles to guide umbrella habitat projects (Programmatic Issue B. Evaluate and Improve Umbrella Projects, pages 9-11) and in the 2022 Anadromous Fish Habitat and Hatchery Review, there was a Policy Issue (iii.b) directed at umbrella projects (please see pages 18-21 of the 2022 Decision Letter) that confirmed the importance of these projects and the principles, with the exception that the annual report (i.e., principle #6) was no longer required. It was, however, recommended that umbrella projects present an update to the Council biennially on their accomplishments and results. For the GRMW, this last occurred in August 2023.

In preparation for this round of umbrella project presentations, staff prepared a list of questions intended to guide presentations. These include:

1. What's the goal of your program and how do project actions further that goal?
2. Describe how your program is being administered. Has that changed since the last review?
3. Describe how projects and actions are solicited, reviewed, prioritized, and selected for action. Are the criteria working?
4. Provide a list of funded projects since the last presentation to the Council. Include background information on the recipients of funding, project costs, title, location and short project summary, and implementation timeline.
5. Describe how your program fits into larger ecological goals such as improving ecosystem function, species recovery, etc.
6. Describe progress towards meeting your program's objectives. Are you getting what you expect from these projects? What is the process to document outcomes? Where are results being reported?
7. Describe any problems encountered or lessons learned. How are you implementing adaptive management (new techniques, emerging scientific literature, etc.)? Has adaptive management or lessons learned changed your approach?
8. Provide a summary of program costs, including administrative versus implementation costs, and include any cost share partners.

The seven umbrella projects under the Program are listed below.

Project #1992-026-01, Grande Ronde Model Watershed
Project# 2003-011-00, Columbia River Estuary Habitat Restoration

Project # 2007-397-00, John Day Watershed Restoration
Project # 2009-012-00, Willamette Bi-Op Habitat Restoration Project
Project # 2010-001-00, Upper Columbia Programmatic Habitat
Project # 2010-077-00, Tucannon River Programmatic Habitat Project
Project # 2017-005-00, Pacific Lamprey Conservation Initiative

More Info:

- Grande Ronde Model Watershed website
- BPA Annual Report 2024
- Grande Ronde Model Watershed Synthesis, 1992-2016
- Publications
    - The Grande Ronde Model Watershed: Integrating Science into Restoration Implementation and Adaptive Management
    - A comparison of methods for estimating juvenile salmon habitat capacity to assist with restoration planning and evaluation

Grande Ronde Model Watershed

Project 1992-026-01

Northwest Power and Conservation Council Meeting
October 15, 2026

A story of partnership, prioritization, implementation, learning, and adaptation



Local knowledge + shared science + structured process = restoration at meaningful scale

1 Locally led

A diverse local board and watershed partnerships keep decisions grounded in place, people, and fish.

2 Prioritized

The Atlas and Stepwise Process connect limiting factors, life stages, reaches, and actions.

3 Adaptive

Implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and new science feed the next round of decisions.

The Mission of the Grande Ronde Model Watershed Foundation is to develop and oversee the implementation, maintenance and monitoring of coordinated resource management that will enhance the natural resources of the Grande Ronde and Imnaha River Basins.

GRMW program history

1992

GRMW begins as a model watershed for local, citizen-based planning.

1994–2000s

Board-led prioritization, watershed action plans, and project implementation grow across public and private lands. 2004 Subbasin Plan.

2010s

Science, partnerships, and basin-scale planning mature; the Atlas becomes a central prioritization framework.

2020s

Large **process-based restoration**, structured implementation, adaptive management, and stronger evaluation.

Today

A locally led umbrella project connecting funding, technical review, project sponsors, and partners.

What has stayed constant

Local coordination, diverse partners, public/private land collaboration, and a focus on habitat.

What has changed

The scale and sophistication of prioritization, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

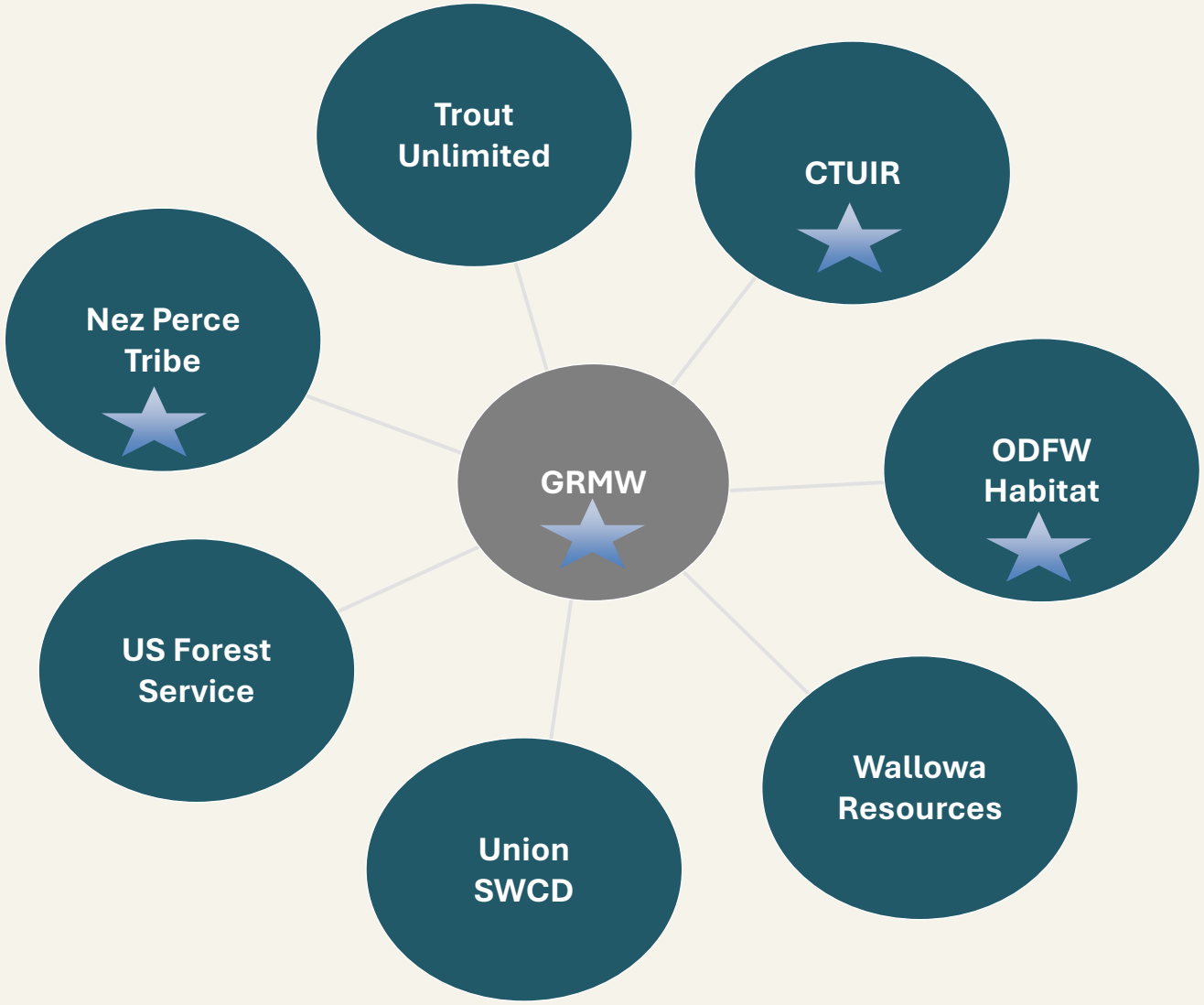
Grande Ronde & Imnaha River Atlas Partners

Funding & Technical Support

- BPA
- BOR
- OWEB
- NRCS

Regulatory & Cost Share

- NMFS
- USFWS



Implementation

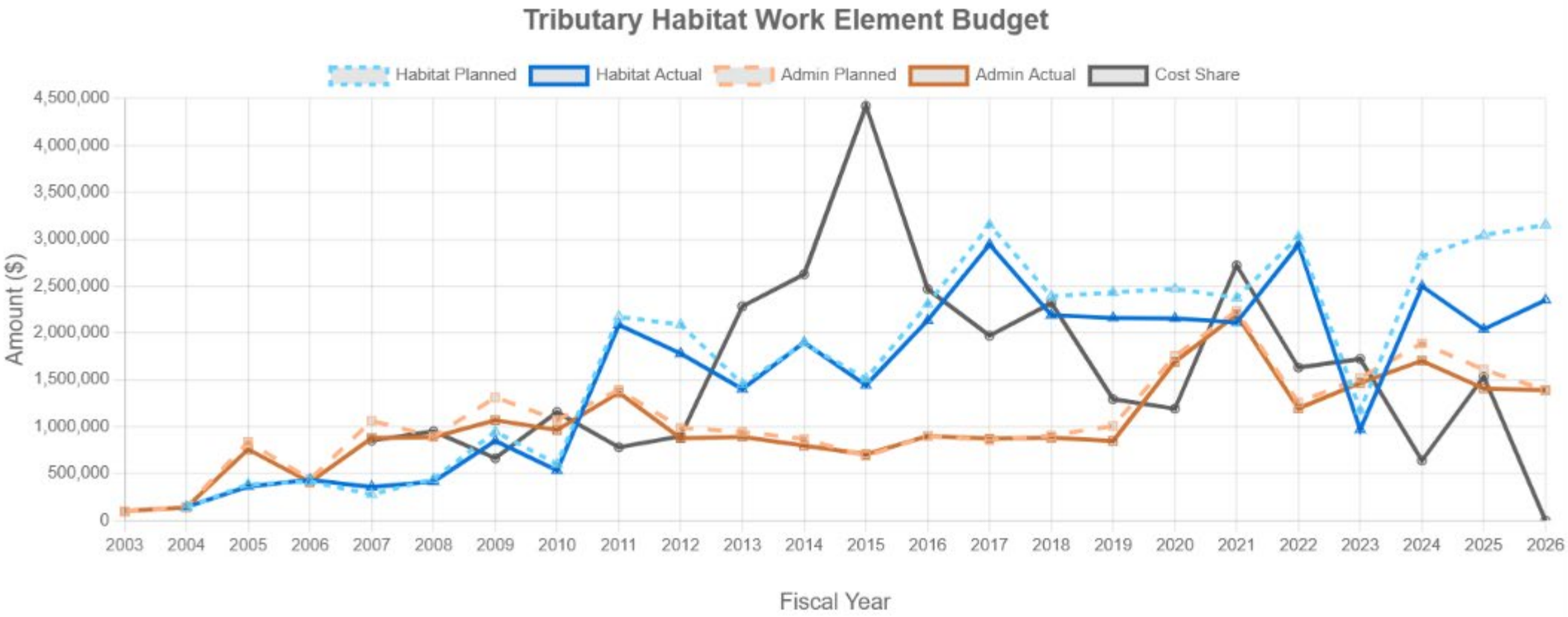
NPCC Fish & Wildlife Program

RM&E

- ODFW
- CTUIR
- NPT
- CRITFC
- NOAA

GRMW Project Performance

Projects to chart: 1992-026-01 Grande Ronde Model Watershed



Averages

Habitat Planned
(FY 2004-2026)
$1,768,814

Habitat Actual
(FY 2004-2026)
$1,574,125

Admin Planned
(FY 2003-2026)
$1,087,149

Admin Actual
(FY 2003-2026)
$1,017,297

Cost Share
(FY 2007-2026)
$1,606,356

Actual Habitat/Admin Ratio
(FY 2004-2026)
149%

The Stepwise Process

01 Opportunity

A restoration opportunity is identified and framed (Team agrees it's a priority). A project sponsor is selected.

02 Prospectus

Objectives, location, constraints, and are documented. initial fit

03 Design Review

The Implementation Team reviews 15,30 and 80% designs and provides comments. Aligns with BPA's HIP IV reviews.

04 Draft Proposal

Project sponsor applies to GRMW for funding using our online proposal platform.

05 Site Visit

The Implementation Team and Board visit each proposed project and provide comments back to the sponsors.

06 Final Proposal

Site visit and review comments are addressed in the final proposal. The Board reviews and provides a funding decision.

The point is a repeatable decision pathway that makes project selection and design more transparent.

Atlas: strategic plan + prioritization

What is Atlas?

Connects fish species and life stages to habitat conditions, limiting factors, restoration actions, and restoration opportunities.

Builds upon previous action plans and subbasin plans.

Tier 1

Tier 1 identifies the highest-priority reaches/areas for restoration. Each project opportunity connects limiting factors and action types to guide project development.

Consistent language across many strategic plans in CRB.

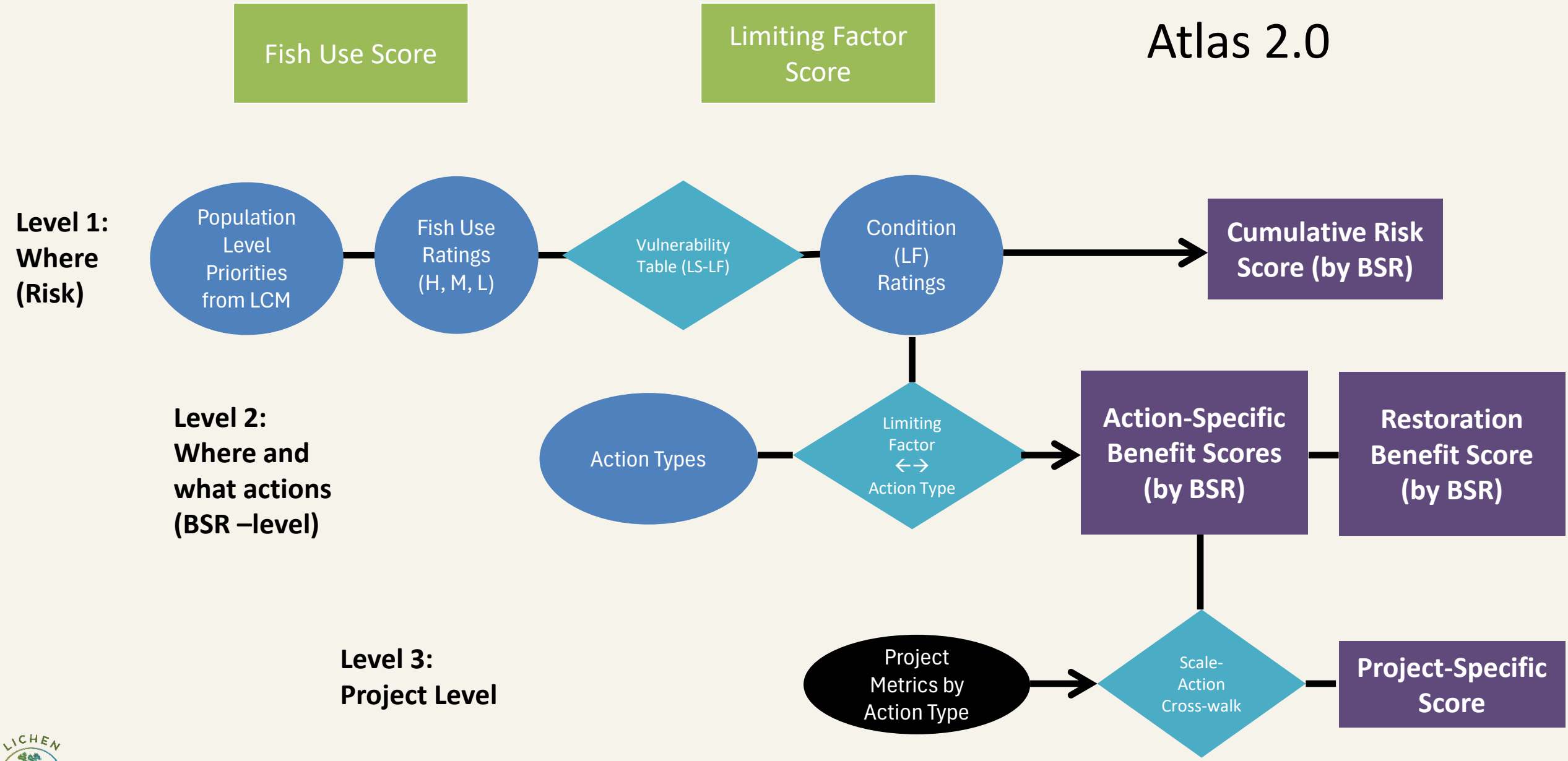
Why update it?

Adaptive Management!

New monitoring and research, life cycle modeling, project experience, and regional coordination should change what we do — and where we do it.

ATLAS = A LIVING DECISION SUPPORT SYSTEM

Atlas 2.0


Fish Use Score
Limiting Factor Score
Level 1: Where (Risk)
Population Level Priorities from LCM
Fish Use Ratings (H, M, L)
Vulnerability Table (LS-LF)
Condition (LF) Ratings
Cumulative Risk Score (by BSR)
Level 2: Where and what actions (BSR –level)
Action Types
Limiting Factor ←→ Action Type
Action-Specific Benefit Scores (by BSR)
Restoration Benefit Score (by BSR)
Level 3: Project Level
Project Metrics by Action Type
Scale-Action Cross-walk
Project-Specific Score

Improvement: Updates to the Catherine Creek and Upper Grande Ronde River Atlas

Direct input from the Chinook Life Cycle Model

Ben Staton (CRITFC) ran scenarios looking at 10% improvements across various in-basin life stages.

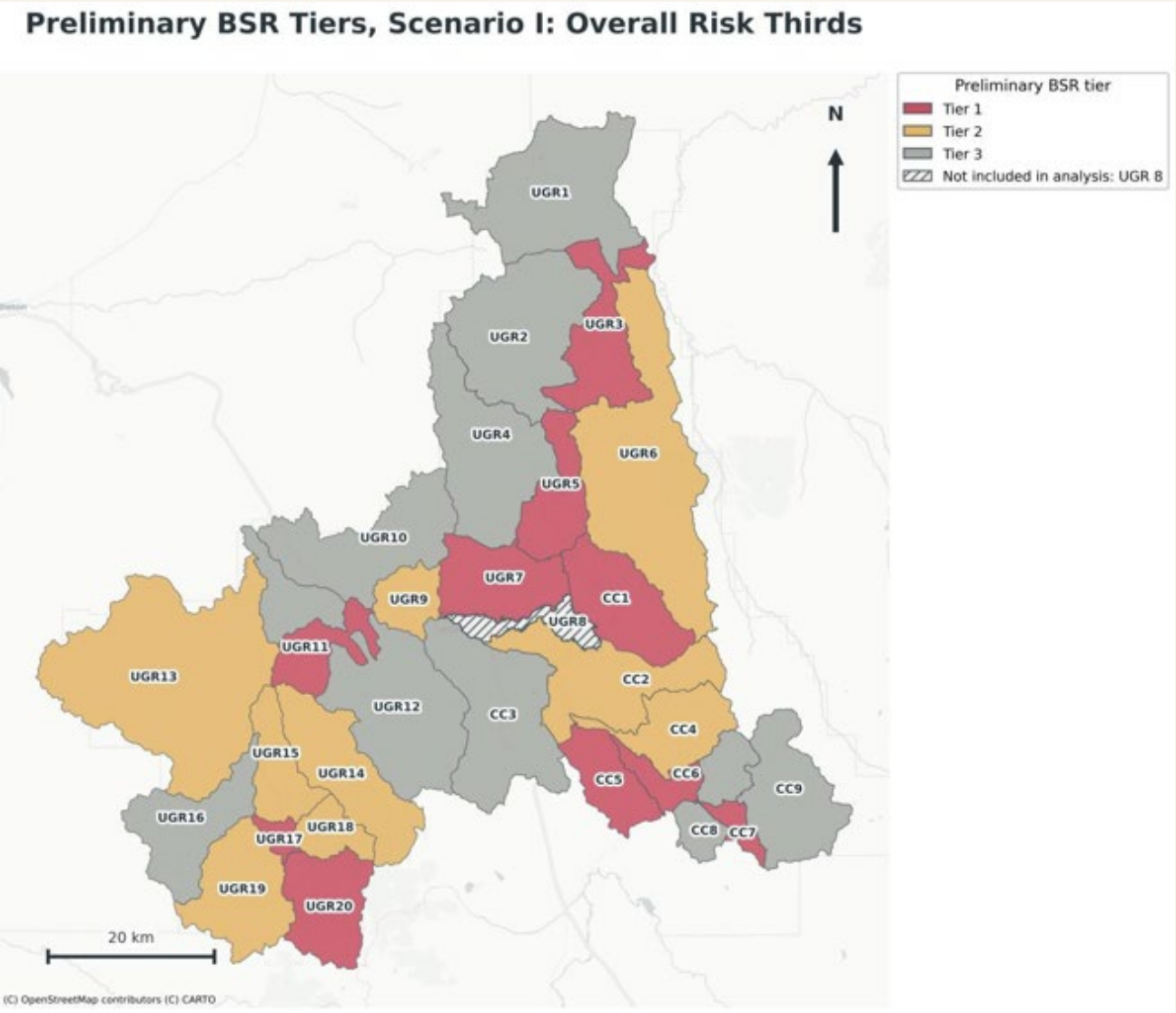
Overwinter rearing and outmigration life stages may provide the most population benefit.

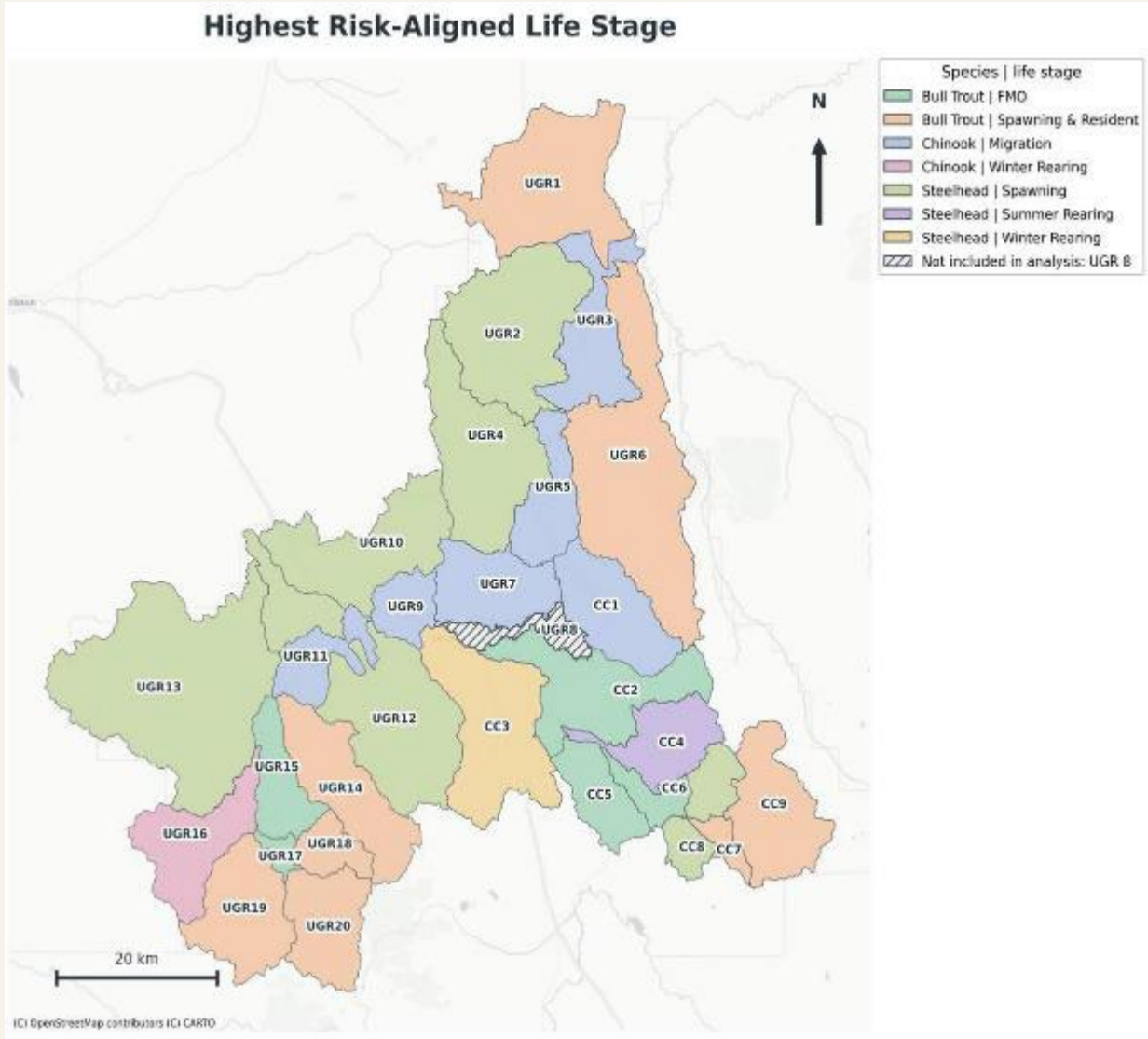
Flexibility (more adaptable)

1. Overall priority areas identified (Tier 1, 2, 3)
2. Identify highest priority reaches for a specific species and life stage.
3. Can prioritize reaches based on a specific limiting factor.

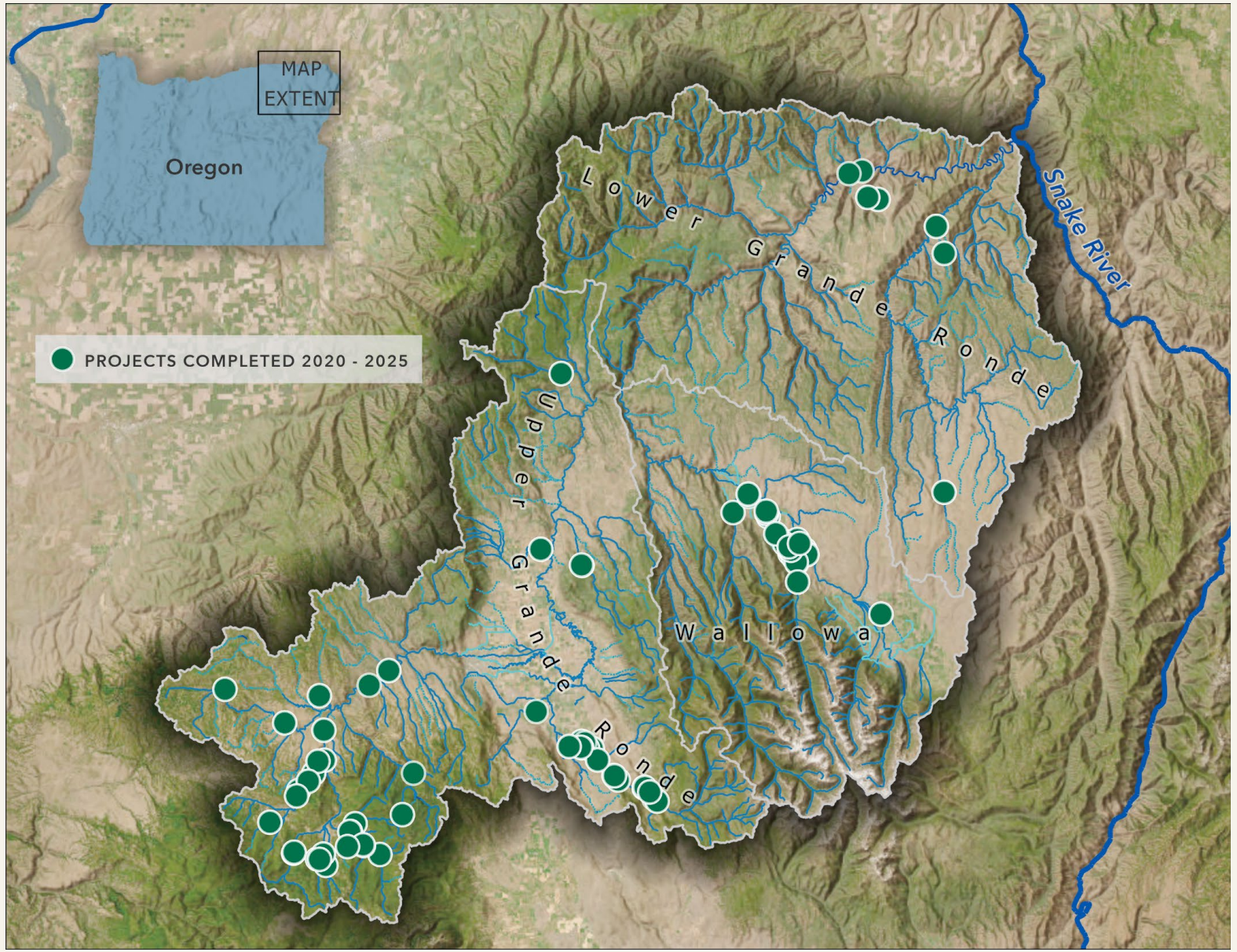
The goal is the best science inputs while preserving local context and knowledge.

Updated Atlas (preliminary)





Where the work is happening



Strategy Performance Indicators (SPI) 2020-25	Total
Acres improved in riparian areas	2,505
Instream flow added (CFS)	149.5
Miles of stream habitat accessed	65
Mile of stream with improved complexity	66

- 74.6% Tier 1
- 19.4% Tier 2
- 6% Tier 3.

Bear Creek Habitat Restoration

- Tier 1 Project - ODFW
- 68.8 floodplain acres improved
- 120 acres riparian improved/protected
- 3 miles stream improved complexity







What's next: larger, process based restoration projects

Chesnimnus Creek

Nez Perce Tribes have worked with private landowners, USFS and TU to plan **16 miles** of continuous restoration on Chesnimnus Creek. First phase will start next year.

Minam River WMA

Nine miles of the main stem Minam River that was purchased by RMEF and ODFW. Hope to start design next year. Wild Chinook populations with no supplementation.

Catherine Creek Hall Ranch

Moving **two miles of a state highway** out of the floodplain. Core Chinook salmon spawning and rearing.





Project evaluation: show the change

Wallowa River Wilson-Haun Floodplain Restoration Project

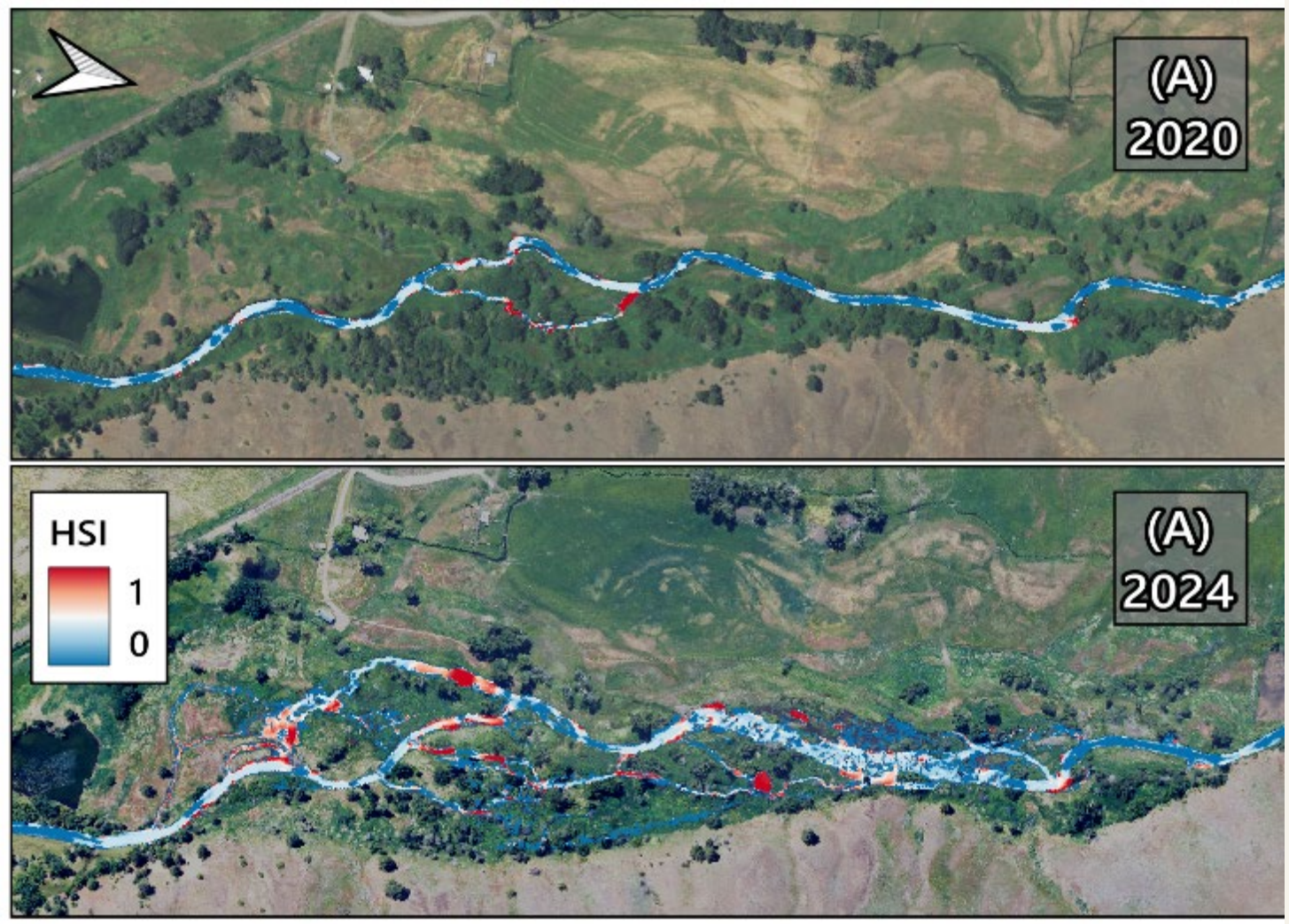
Metric	Calculated from	Before	After	Δ %
Floodplain area (acres)	Floodprone width	26.2	32.3	23%
Floodplain inundation index	Floodprone width	295.6	370.2	25%
Sinuosity	Thalweg profile	1.25	1.31	5%
Number of side channels (Low flow)	Hydraulic model	1	16	1500%
Side channel length (Low flow) (ft)	Hydraulic model	762	6249	720%
Number of side channels (1yr flow)	Hydraulic model	3	21	600%
Side channel length (1yr flow) (ft)	Hydraulic model	1012	8071	698%
Number of side channels (Bankfull flow)	Hydraulic model	3	20	567%
Side channel length (Bankfull flow) (ft)	Hydraulic model	1013	8263	716%
Side channel ratio	Hydraulic model	0.26	2.18	739%
River complexity index	Bankfull width	0.23	1.37	496%
Bankfull width (ft)	Bankfull width	51	165	224%
Bankfull width to depth ratio	Bankfull width	20.4	62.8	208%
Morphological quality index	Bankfull width	0.64	0.82	28%
Number of pools	Thalweg profile	21	40	91%
Number of Pools - mainstem	Thalweg profile	16	20	25%
Number of Pools – side channels	Thalweg profile/low flow	5	20	300%







Across evaluated projects: HSI change from four large floodplain projects



13.5 acres of new highly suitable (>0.5 HSI) rearing habitat

Estimate 2,105 fish/acre (Bond 2018; Thorson 2014)

Enough new habitat for 28,417 juvenile Chinook salmon

CRAMER FISH SCIENCES
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A core strength: bringing in additional funding

GRMW's role can be measured not only by dollars spent, but by the projects and partnerships those dollars unlock.

Catalyst

Early coordination, planning, and technical work reduce uncertainty and make larger projects fundable.

Leverage

Partner funding and in-kind contributions expand the scale of implementation beyond a single source.

Continuity

A local institution keeps relationships and project knowledge in the basin over multiple funding cycles.

Document the leverage story project-by-project: GRMW investment → additional funding → total project scope → measurable habitat response.

A practical adaptive-management framework

1 What did we expect?

- State the hypothesis, limiting factor & life-stage response in your strategic plan - Atlas.
- LCM can help inform population response.
- Still learning what the long term benefits from process based restoration are.

2 What happened?

- Track key metrics: physical habitat, project function, fish use.
- Use Habitat Suitability Models and project evaluations to measure progress. Refine measures as knowledge improves.

3 What needs to change?

- Update Atlas priorities as our understanding of limiting factors and fish use improves.
- Monthly Implementation Team meetings, Annual State of the Science, and Atlas updates 5-10 years.

The goal is not to prove every project "worked." The goal is to make the next decision better informed than the last.

The work is local.
The science is shared.
The process keeps improving.

“Without all of you, what would these salmon return to?”

Thank you.

Questions?

