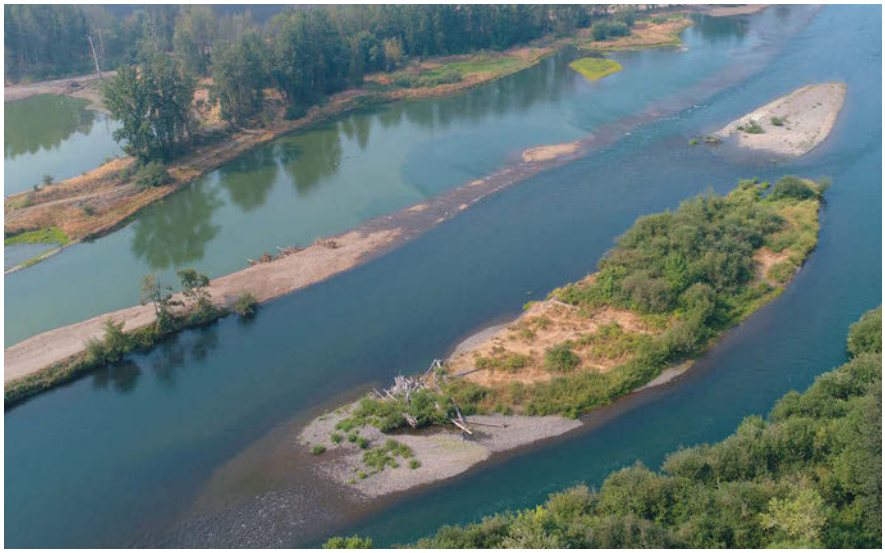
Enhancement Reclamation Creates a Bridge Over (historically) Troubled Waters

By Libby Morrison

THE AGGREGATE INDUSTRY, like all extractive natural resources industries, is riddled with conflicts. Conflicts with neighbors protesting, "Not in my backyard." Conflicts with those who don't understand that hauling distance, equals hauling cost; and therefore project cost. Environmental conflicts over land, water and air. Therefore, given the industry's history of contention and the mounting environmental concerns of today, it was particularly encouraging to see leaders from the mining industry, conservation organizations, and government agencies come together and discuss a collaborative vision for the future, and learn about a successful project with deep roots in the past.

The 1,305-acre Willamette Confluence Preserve (located in Lane County, Oregon) is owned by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) but was once owned by the family owned and operated Wildish Sand and Gravel, which began in 1935. It was the company's flagship property, producing some of the first materials that shaped their beloved Eugene and Springfield communities. In the early 1970s, the Oregon Legislature authorized funding for purchase of a 3,500-acre Willamette Greenway park, but available funding was used to acquire 2,300-acre Buford Park (which includes the summit of Mt. Pisgah), adjacent to the Wildish property where mining was still active. In 1990, the Friends of Buford Park & Mt. Pisgah (Friends) began discussions with the Wildish family to acquire the property. "Our vision was to fulfill the original vision for a larger park with six miles of river frontage restored for future public enjoyment," said Friends executive director Chris Orsinger. With so much history, it was understandably a tough property for the Wildish family to part with, and they would only do so given the right price and the right reason. The local conservation community had both.

The Willamette Confluence Preserve property was not only blessed with a significant amount of prime concrete aggregates—it was also an ecological gold mine. "Every scientific assessment of conservation needs and opportunities in the Willamette Basin identified this property as one of the highest priorities for conservation," said Jason Nuckols, Willamette and Restoration



Program manager for TNC, who leads the site's ongoing enhancement reclamation. The site included roughly six miles of the Middle Fork of the Willamette River, one mile of the Coast Fork, more than a dozen shallow pits, and was located at a confluence—where two rivers converge—known for extremely high levels of biodiversity and productivity. It was a prize for the conservation community and a restoration gem that could benefit the whole region.

However, it took two decades of intermittent and difficult deliberations that involved the Wildish family, the Friends and by 2006, The Nature Conservancy to ultimately reach agreement, secure funding, and complete the purchase in 2010. "Achieving this community vision was only possible because we spent years learning about the unique perspective of the aggregate industry and developing trust with family members" said Orsinger. This was no small feat. Relationships among varying industries in the Willamette Valley—aggregate and environmental among them—have not always been smooth, because their priorities frequently differ. It has always been challenging to bring those who want to preserve land, versus those who want to produce aggregates, onto the same "side." Therefore, these negotiations required trust, understanding and patience. They were also not just talking about some random parcel. They were discussing a family's heritage and debating the highest use of the land while trying to ensure that the property's future would match its potential, even if that wasn't in mining. Ultimately, the deal was struck, extensive restoration work proceeded, and even further relationship building continues at the site to this day. "Everyone being willing to work together was a big part of the project's success," said Liz Cawood, former Oregon TNC board member.

By early 2018, three phases of construction to restore floodplain habitats on the Willamette Confluence Preserve have been completed, with restoration plantings underway on the third phase. The old shallow sand and gravel pits have provided geographic structure to the project and "emergent" wetland habitat has been created and planted with native rushes, sedges and other vegetation that offer prime aquatic habitat for young salmon, frogs and turtles. A half-mile of old levee has been removed, and a haul road that functioned like a dike has been punched through, connecting the ponds formed by quarrying to the Willamette's main stem into the site. Wildlife, including beaver, federally listed salmon species, river otter, deer, cougar and migratory birds, has already returned to the restored areas. But more than just wildlife is flocking to the preserve.

The Nature Conservancy conducts private tours and recognizes the opportunities presented by this location for education and connection. "It's a demonstration site. We're putting a lot of best management practices into it," said Nuckols. That goes for more than just the environmental community—it's a demonstration site for the aggregates industry as well.

In September 2017, roughly a dozen individuals from throughout the Willamette Valley met to hear the story of the preserve, witness its transformation in action, and most importantly, network with one another to start building relationships. The tour included representatives from local sand and gravel companies, Oregon's aggregate member association, conservation organizations who worked on the project, and state regulatory officials. "It's incredibly satisfying seeing the results of reclamation from an industry standpoint, and as a member of the community—from a human

standpoint. We see the results of our efforts and what we build all the time: roads, homes, bridges. It's wonderful seeing and remembering that the land comes full circle too and is put back to good use," said Dorothy Hilburn, environmental, health and safety coordinator for CRH Americas Materials, West Division and member of the Oregon association.

Not only did the tour provide an opportunity to see enhancement reclamation in action and witness the potential for pits following material extraction, it got individuals from historically separate industries to start thinking about the benefits of collaboration.

"No one can accomplish this work alone. When we consider the high human and ecological value of floodplains and the number of aggregate operations within our floodplains, we find it essential to incorporate aggregate sites into how we protect and restore floodplain habitat," said Nuckols. "It's not difficult to find ways that both industry and conservation groups benefit from partnering with one another."

Collaboration between the aggregates industry and other groups are not restricted to just the conservation community. Hundreds of examples of enhancement reclamation projects exist—ranging from recreation opportunities to development sites, and of course, restoration projects. Closer inspection of each success story reveals that it is collaboration, partnerships, and forward-thinking that sets these projects apart from standard reclamation practices. Tours leading to outreach and networking, like those at the Willamette Confluence Preserve, help move the mining industry forward, and they can cause a welcome ripple effect. "I've told a bunch of people about the tour! It was inspiring to see and it is a great part of the local heritage" said Hilburn, "If we can work together with other industries, we can make reclamation easier. It's important to train companies about reclamation, discuss new opportunities, and learn about one another's work." ■