



BEFORE THE FLOOD:

Protecting People, Property and Wildlife Along the Touchet River

PHOTOS AND STORY BY KEN GRAHAM

In February 1996, the Touchet River and Patit Creek both exploded. Floodwaters rushed through the streets on the north side of Dayton. Much of Downtown Waitsburg was underwater. Bridges were washed out on the North and South Touchet Roads, the Wolf Fork Road and the Patit Road. Citizens, including many students, spent hours filling and placing sandbags along river and creek banks in and around Dayton and Waitsburg. Dozens of homes in the area received serious flood damage.

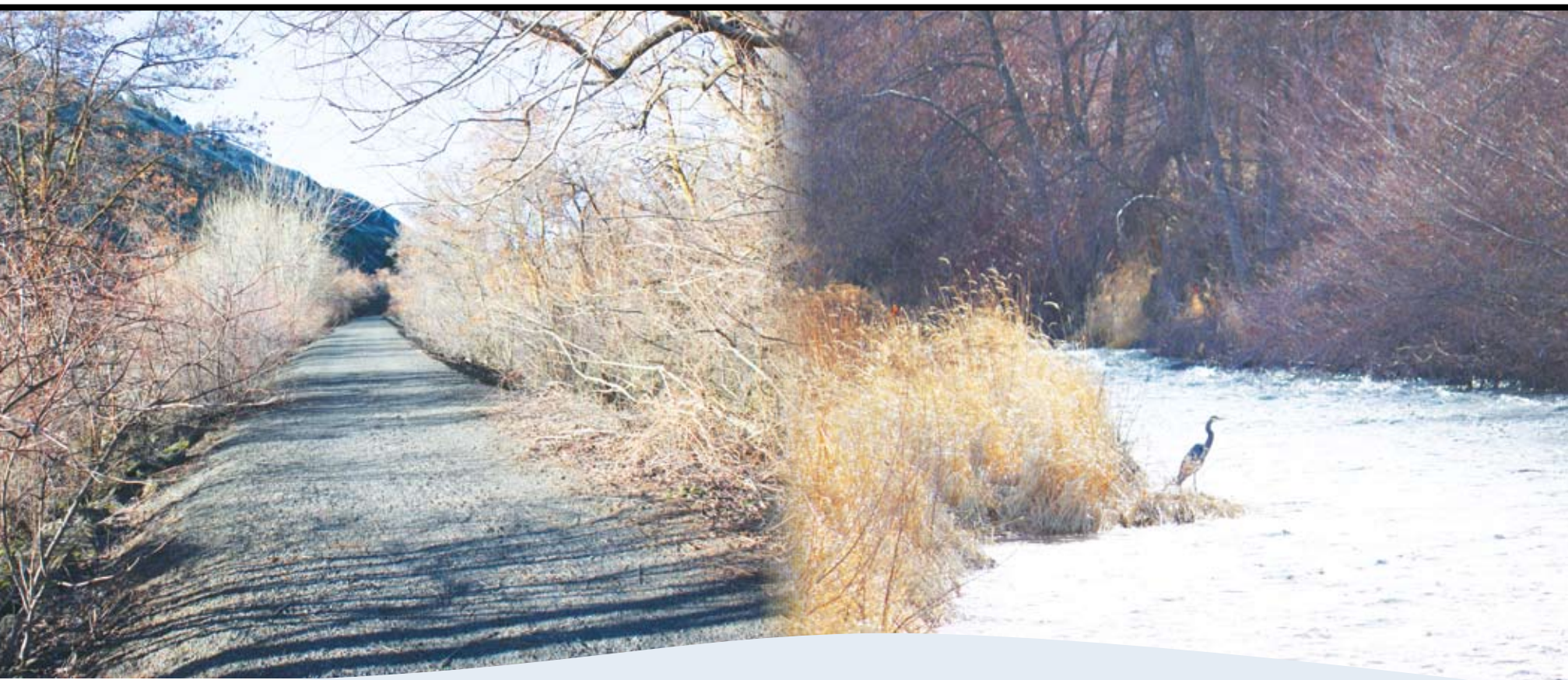
As devastating as the '96 flood was, the damage could have been much worse. The south side of Dayton was spared from the flooding, thanks to the levee that was built along the east side of the Touchet River by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers decades ago.

Most Dayton residents call it "The Dike", and for many it is a place to walk the dog or jog or ride a bike. The dike path extends nearly two miles south from Main Street, next to Flour Mill Park, intersecting with South Fourth Street at its southern end. Trees along most of its length provide shade from the summer sun. Steelhead fishermen walk along the dike to their favorite fishing spot. Deer and turkeys can often be seen loitering on the dike path or in the brush beside it.

A "MINIMALLY ACCEPTABLE" RATING

But the Touchet River Dike is a lot more than a recreation spot. Each year, the levee in Dayton is inspected by the Corps of Engineers to make sure it can do its job: protecting nearby homes during the next flood. For each of the last several years, the levee has received a rating from the Corps of "Minimally Acceptable". "The Corps has told us repeatedly that we need to remove vegetation from both sides of the dike," says Columbia County Commissioner Dick Jones. "They feel that any tree with a trunk diameter more than two inches can potentially weaken the dike with its roots. And any vegetation makes it hard for them to inspect the dike. What the Corp wants is for the whole dike to be stripped of all vegetation, fifteen feet on either side."

In October 2008, after the Corps of Engineers' annual inspection, the Columbia County Commissioners received a letter from the Corps which included the following: "After September 30, 2010, your project will be given an 'Unacceptable' rating if it does not comply with Corps' vegetation standards . . ."



Commissioner Jones says that a rating of “Unacceptable” by the Corp would mean the levee is “decertified”. “We need to avoid decertification at all costs,” he says. “This would be a nightmare for Dayton.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) maintains maps which identify officially designated “flood plains” and “flood ways”. Jones says that decertification of Dayton’s levee would immediately trigger redrawing of FEMA’s Dayton flood maps. “They would treat the levee as if it weren’t there,” says Jones. “Much of the south side of Dayton would be reclassified within a flood zone.”

The greatest impact of levee decertification would be that most homes with mortgages in the newly drawn flood plain would be required to carry federal flood insurance. According to Bette Lou Crothers of Dayton’s State Farm Insurance Agency, flood insurance on a \$150,000 home with a basement is likely to cost the homeowner around \$1,500 per year.

The flood plain designation also puts other limitations on property owners. According to Columbia County Planner Rich Hendricksen, new construction or major remodeling projects in a flood zone

The greatest impact of levee decertification would be that most homes with mortgages in the newly drawn flood plain would be required to carry federal flood insurance.

face additional building code limitations, such as elevation requirements and special foundation designs.

The Corps of Engineers’ position on removal of vegetation from levees is longstanding. Herb Bessey, Levee Safety Program Manager for the Walla Walla District of the Corps, says that trees can cause serious problems on levees. For instance, if a tree falls during high water, it can produce a hole, exposing the

embankment to possible erosion and water seepage. “Levees are engineered structures,” he says, “and the presence of vegetation can weaken the structural integrity, leaving communities vulnerable to potential flooding.”

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FISH?

According to local Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) habitat biologist Tom Schirm, maintaining vegetation along the Touchet River is very important for the health of fish. Schirm says that the trees and vegetation along the river provide many benefits to the fish habitat:

- The trees provide shade to keep the water cooler in the summer.
- Trees and shrubs attract insects, which are food for the fish.
- Decaying leaves and small branches that fall into the river provide nutrients for insects and fish.

According to Schirm, the Touchet River is home to steelhead, rainbow trout and bull trout. A few Chinook salmon have also begun returning to the river in Dayton in the last few years.

“For a healthy fish habitat, the water temperature needs to stay below 70 degrees (F),” says Schirm. “Right now, in the summer, we get readings of 70 or a little higher in the river in Dayton. That’s with a lot of tree canopy along the dike.” Schirm says that if all of the trees along the dike were removed, summer water temperatures would almost certainly exceed what the fish can handle. “The steelhead can handle up into the mid-70s, but won’t remain in that portion of the river at temperatures above that,” he says. “The Chinook and the trout need even cooler temperatures.”

Native Chinook salmon and steelhead have both been declared “threatened” species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Continued on Page 14

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Before the Flood Continued from Page 13

Local authorities say that removing vegetation from the dike would likely put them in violation of the ESA, as well as the federal Clean Water Act, which both prohibit activities that drive fish from streams.

"It looks to us that no matter what we do, we'll be violating one federal requirement or another."

— DICK JONES, COMMISSIONER

Schirm and others we spoke with agree that directives the city and county get from federal and state agencies regarding protection of the fish habitat are in direct conflict with the requirements coming from the Corps of Engineers to remove vegetation from the levee. "It looks to us that no matter what we do, we'll be violating one federal requirement or another," says Commissioner Jones.

GETTING EVERYBODY TALKING

"This is a nationwide problem," says Dayton Mayor Craig George. "Since Hurricane Katrina, the Corps of Engineers has really stepped up their levee enforcement. But their rules are in conflict with habitat requirements that come from agencies like NOAA (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, which is the federal agency overseeing the health of Pacific salmon and steelhead) and the Department of Fish and Wildlife." George says that many towns and cities around the country are facing the conflicting demands of the different agencies. "In some cases they've given up, because the two sides refuse to compromise," he says.



The Touchet River, between the Highway 12 bridge and railroad bridge in Dayton.

In January 2009, Mayor George and Commissioner Jones convened a meeting of a broad range of people with a stake in the levee and the Touchet River. (See a list of participants in the box on page 16.) "We've got everybody at the table talking," says George. "Everyone understands that there's a conflict, and we all believe that there are ways a safe and effective levee can be maintained, while still protecting wildlife." The group has met monthly since that first meeting. George and Jones say that they know of no other places in the country where both Corps and wildlife representatives are sitting down with local authorities to try to work out a long term solution.

The levee committee is addressing a broad range of issues, including some not directly related to the levee. "We felt we needed to look at all areas related to flood mitigation," says Jones. "If we can take preventative measures to reduce flooding impacts, it can only help the levee issue. And many of those measures will also help the fish habitat."

THE SEDIMENT PROBLEM

Dayton resident Steve Martin has been involved with the levee committee since its inception last year. He is the Director of the Lower Snake River Salmon Recovery Board, an organization covering five counties in southeastern Washington. The Board is responsible for creating and implementing a plan to restore endangered fish in local river basins.

Martin says that the stretch of the Touchet River through Dayton is a natural collector of sediment. As the river channel fills up, it not only reduces the

amount of water that can be held during a flood, but it also impairs the fish habitat. "The river bottom in Dayton is considerably higher than it was just a few years ago," he says. "If we could reduce the amount of rock and gravel that washes into the Dayton stretch, we could help the flooding issue as well as improve the fish habitat."

Because of the local topography, Dayton is the spot where the river flattens out and widens, and so sediment naturally collects there.

According to Martin, the problem lies in the Touchet River and its tributaries upstream from Dayton. "In many stretches of the North and South forks of the Touchet and Wolf Fork Creek, south of Dayton, the channel has been tightened and straightened and small dikes and berms have been built over the years," he says. "As a result, the river acts like a sluice, and a lot of rock gets shoved down to Dayton." Martin says that, because of the local topography, Dayton is the spot where the river flattens out and widens, and so sediment naturally collects there.

To help increase water holding capacity in the Touchet, last fall the City of Dayton and Columbia County hired a contractor to dredge 6,666 cubic yards

Continued on Page 16



PROTECTING ENDANGERED SALMON AND STEELHEAD BY KEN GRAHAM

The Lower Snake River Salmon Recovery Board was created in 2002 in response to the listing of native Steelhead and Chinook salmon as threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). Its Director, Steve Martin, of Dayton, says that the Board's purpose is to create and implement a recovery plan for the two species in the Lower Snake River and its tributaries in Washington.

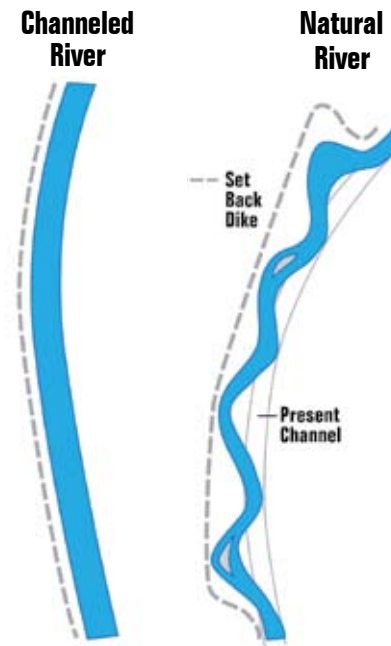
"After the fish were listed, the state of Washington wanted local communities to have control over the recovery process," says Martin. His organization represents Walla Walla, Columbia, Garfield, Whitman and Asotin Counties. The Board is made up of three representatives from each county, including one commissioner. Board members from Columbia County are Commissioner Dick Jones, Roland Schirman and Dick Ducharme.

The primary focus of the Board is to improve

fish habitat. According to Martin, the Board has reviewed and approved funding for numerous projects to improve fish habitat. Funding comes primarily from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which is the federal agency responsible for overseeing recovery of endangered ocean-going fish.

"One of the highest priority areas for improving salmon and steelhead habitat is the Touchet River from Waitsburg upstream to the mountains," says Martin. He says that the area has a very high potential to produce a lot of salmon and steelhead, and while water temperature and stream flow are both fairly good, the river lacks habitat complexity and diversity, primarily due to historic straightening and diking.

Martin has been an active participant on the Touchet River Levee Committee that has been meeting in Dayton since January 2009.



A Detailed Profile of the Touchet River

The first major initiative to come out of the Touchet River Levee Committee is a project to conduct a "geomorphic" assessment of the Touchet River. In December 2009, the Snake River Salmon Recovery Board helped the City of Dayton obtain a \$205,000 grant to conduct the assessment from the National Forest boundary south of Dayton downstream to Waitsburg.

1.) According to Board Director Steve Martin, the assessment, which will begin this year, will consist of three phases:

2.) Aerial mapping of the river using LIDAR – a type of radar imaging that provides a detailed three-dimensional profile of the river basin.

3.) On-ground assessment of habitat, including measuring sediment in the river. The study will address the origin, transport and deposit of sediment.

A pilot project on a one- to two-mile stretch of river, which will make changes, such as moving levees and berms, to allow the river to flow more naturally and reduce sediment movement.

"Speculation is that channel straightening has led to abnormal sediment (gravel and rock) movement and increased flood risk," says Martin. "The assessment will help us to better understand the causes of these two interrelated occurrences and shed light on ways to reduce them."

The sediment analysis and pilot project design will take at least a year to complete before the pilot project is started. Once the assessment is completed, Martin and other participants in the levee committee hope to work with the numerous landowners along the Touchet and its tributaries to develop a long-term plan to return the river to a more natural state. This will reduce sediment transfer and flood risks and improve the fish habitat throughout the river.

"This will be a voluntary effort on the part of landowners," says Martin. "It will only be successful if landowners understand the recommendations coming from the assessment and support their implementation." □

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Before the Flood Continued from Page 14

of material out of the river between the Highway 12 bridge and the railroad bridge in Dayton. "This was a stopgap measure," says Commissioner Jones. "We needed to increase capacity in case of a high water event in the next two or three years." Jones says the fall project was not a long-term solution, and much more needs to be done.

Martin says that many other steps can be taken to help keep sediment in the upstream portions of the river from making it to Dayton. "If we can return portions of the river to its natural path, with places to spread out when the water gets high, much of the sediment will get deposited upstream of Dayton," he says.

Besides helping reduce flooding problems in Dayton, Martin says that these changes to the upstream river would also create a much improved fish habitat. "This is a 'win-win'," he says. "But it's a long-term process, and it requires the involvement of a lot of private landowners."

After getting involved with the Dayton levee working group, Martin began researching what steps could be taken to make improvements to the river upstream of Dayton. "We needed to get much more information about the topography of the river basin," he says. "We needed to find the best places where pressure could be taken off the river and high water could be held."



Members of the Dayton Levee Roundtable at Dayton City Hall.

In late 2009, the Snake River Salmon Recovery Board submitted a proposal on behalf of the City of Dayton, which obtained a grant for \$205,000 to conduct an aerial mapping project. The project, to be conducted during 2010, will cover the Touchet River and its tributaries, from the National Forest Boundary downstream to Waitsburg. The article on page 15 describes the details of the mapping study.

The result of the study, Martin says, will be a detailed three-dimensional map of the river and the land around it. "Using this map, we'll be able to pinpoint the best places to make effective changes to the river," he says. Martin says that part of the grant funds will be used to do a pilot project on a one- to two-mile stretch of river.

"What we're envisioning is a very long-term process," says Martin. "It'll take lots of money and cooperation with landowners, but the end result will be a wonderful habitat for fish and a river that handles high water much better." All of this will reduce the pressure on the levee in Dayton and reduce the flood risk there, he says.

IN SEARCH OF COMPROMISE

Gerri Coleman is Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers' representative in Walla Walla. She has been a regular attendee at the monthly levee working group meetings in Dayton. She says that McMorris Rodgers is very supportive of the committee and the fact that all of the parties are talking and trying to reach a compromise. "The congresswoman will provide whatever support she can to help the groups reach a compromise," when the time comes to make hard decisions, says Coleman.

To this point, all of the work and discussion by the committee has not caused the Corps of Engineers to soften its position on the levee in Dayton and its requirement for removal of vegetation. Herb Bessey, of the Corps, has also been a regular attendee of the levee committee meetings. "The importance

Participants in the DAYTON LEVEE ROUNDTABLE

Craig George—Mayor, City of Dayton
Dick Jones—Columbia County Commissioner
Bill Peters—Columbia Co. Emergency Mgmt.
Lisa Caldwell—Columbia Co. Emergency Mgmt.
Drew Woods—Columbia County Engineer
Rich Hendricksen—Columbia County Planner
Herb Bessey—U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Dianne Driscoll—NOAA
Steve Martin—Lower Snake River Salmon Recovery
Chris Buelow—Lower Snake River Salmon Recovery
Tom Schirm—Wash. Dept. of Fish & Wildlife
Gerri Coleman—Office of Congresswoman
Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Jim Costello—City of Dayton
Trina Cole—City of Dayton
Micki Varney—Dayton City Council
Merle Jackson—Dayton City Council

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— STEVE MARTIN

of vegetation for fish and wildlife habitat is well known," says Bessey. He says that representatives of the Corps meet frequently with communities and environmental agencies all over the country to discuss ways to help reduce the impact of removing vegetation.

In August 2009, Mayor George and Commissioner Jones sent a letter to Brigadier General William E.

Continued on Page 21

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Feature Story

Before the Flood Continued from Page 16



A LUSH OASIS OR A BARREN BERM?

Walking along the dike path, more than a mile south of Dayton's Main Street, the river can barely be seen through the trees and brush. Pine and dogwood trees tower overhead. The river and a few birds provide the only soundtrack. On a hot summer day, this section of the levee becomes a cool oasis, with shade and water and peaceful tranquility.

The thought that this spot could become a barren strip of dirt and rock, and a place inhospitable for fish, is hard to imagine. And yet, another flood like the one in 1996 – or worse – will happen sooner or later. When it does, the integrity of this levy will be vital

Rapp, who is the Northwest Division Commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Portland. In their letter, George and Jones asked the Corps to allow

the local working group to create a pilot project to address the issues important to all of the agencies involved. "We propose [a] 3-step approach to provide the essential

Perhaps a compromise that's acceptable to everyone can be reached, and Dayton and Columbia County can be a national model of how to protect people, property and wildlife in a responsible way.

information needed to make policy and procedural modifications to ensure public safety, improve critical habitat for ESA listed fish and address Clean Water Act standards," the letter says.

So far, the Corps of Engineers has not responded directly to the request in the letter, but has asked the local jurisdictions to seek a variance to the Corp's vegetation requirements. According to Mayor George and Commissioner Jones, the type of variance the city and county would be requesting has never been granted by the Corp, anywhere in the country. "We will proceed with the variance request," says Jones. "When it's turned down, as we expect, we will use that to try to put more pressure on the agencies to reach a compromise."

to the protection of people and property in Dayton.

Thankfully, cool heads among local authorities and representatives of the agencies involved are prevailing – so far. Perhaps a

compromise that's acceptable to everyone can be reached, and Dayton and Columbia County can be a national model of how to protect people, property and wildlife in a responsible way. Let's hope so. □

Events

alongside folksinger Thom Dudley and three members of the An Daire Irish Dancers will take the stage during an evening of music, food, drink and fun. Tickets are \$25 per person and are available at Dayton's Skye Book & Brew and Liberty Theater. www.libertytheater.org See article on page 11 for more information.

27 Farm Bureau Annual Members' Meeting

10:00 a.m.
Seneca Activity Center
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Anyone interested in the future of the Columbia County Farm Bureau is welcome to attend the meeting, but only members may vote on the proposed sale of the CCFB to Ag Link, Inc., a farm cooperative headquartered in Reardon, WA. Lunch will be served and RSVP's are requested. For more information contact CCFB General Manager, Joe Bush, at (509) 382-4743.

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Pheasants Forever is a national

wildlife habitat conservation organization with a diverse membership of hunters, non-hunters, ranchers, farmers, landowners, conservation enthusiasts and wildlife officials.

Since 1991 the Blue Mountain Chapter of Pheasants Forever has completed over 50 habitat projects in Columbia and Walla Walla counties. Chapter members planted an estimated 15,700 trees and shrubs, financed the installation of seven "gallinaceous" bird guzzlers (buried 500-gallon cisterns covered with an apron for collecting rain and snow melt) and provided native grass seed for an estimated 50 acres of nesting cover. These projects benefit all upland wildlife species.

Every year since 2004, the chapter has provided fifty, 50-pound bags of seed to land owners wishing to establish food plots. The chapter also works with the Washington Department of Wildlife and the National Resources Conservation Service to establish habitat and food plots.

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