



# Return to nature

How Bailey Nurseries removed dams to build environmental resilience

BY LINDA REPPLINGER

**O**n a crisp late-winter morning, Bailey Nurseries Water Resources Manager Jon Estes and Yamhill Soil and Water Conservation District Conservation Projects Manager Jordan Anderson trek through newly established willows — already 8 feet tall — along the banks of Salt Creek in Yamhill County.

A startled great blue heron flies off. The water in the creek is running fairly clear of sediment — all signs that their work is paying off.

**Bailey Nurseries** (Farwest booth #17019) has been taking strides to create on-farm systems that sustain their operations and the resources that support them. Water and watersheds have been a major focus of these system improvements. “Water will only become increasingly more important,” said Estes.

Through a combination of projects, Bailey Nurseries is caring for the water and fish and wildlife habitat in Salt Creek. Projects like these are important because they add up to improve Oregon’s environment, provide clean water, and provide



Above: Salt Creek before any changes were made at Bailey Nurseries outside of Yamhill. Top photo: A 2024 drone photo showing water flowing through where the North Dam was, and the majority of Bailey's Yamhill operations in the background. ABOVE PHOTO COURTESY OF GOOGLE EARTH TOPPHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY NURSERIES

a win-win for the nursery business as well. In the case of the dam removal projects, Bailey Nurseries partnered with the Yamhill Soil and Water District and a state grantmaking agency, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board.

## About Bailey Nurseries

A fifth-generation, family-owned business based out of St. Paul, Minnesota, Bailey opened its first West Coast nursery at the Yamhill location in 1977. Today, Bailey has three locations in Oregon and one in Washington, totaling over 1,000 acres of >>

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Water flows through the area of the creek where the South Dam was. PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY NURSERIES

shrubs, trees, and plants on the West Coast that are shipped wholesale across North America. Additional locations in Illinois and Georgia round out the operations.

### Dam removal

In 2022, Bailey Nurseries completed two earthen dam removal projects on their property on Salt Creek, a tributary to the North Yamhill River, outside of Yamhill, Oregon. The North Dam was constructed by previous owners in the 1960s to create an instream reservoir for agricultural operations. Bailey added the South Dam twenty-five years ago to catch runoff from the nursery's container yard.

In 2016, Bailey completed an important project that had significant positive water quality benefits and eventually made the dam removals possible. When Bailey Nurseries discovered the creek was listed as essential salmonid habitat for winter steelhead rearing, the nursery constructed an off-stream container yard runoff recovery pond that also allowed irrigation water to be recycled and stored away from thirsty invasive grasses.

Paired with an upgraded irrigation system, the new setup provides greater

control and precision, reducing overall water use and building resilience against seasonal fluctuations in water supply. Drainage tiles were rerouted from both instream reservoirs to the new pond, and the abandoned dams were no longer of use.

"The dams were sitting there free-flowing, often flooding in spring and fall," Estes said.

In 2017, Estes got the ball rolling for dam removal because "it was the right thing to do." He hired an ecologist to identify and map the area's wetland and start the process of obtaining permits and engineering for dam removal.

Completing the permitting process with multiple agencies can be challenging. This is where coordinating with a local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) or Watershed Council (WC) can be especially helpful. "Don't be afraid to reach out," Estes said. "It's especially great having local folks to work with — they want to help and support. They know avenues of getting things done that a regular landowner doesn't. "It can feel vulnerable for landowners to open up to agencies. You worry that it will invite unintended visitors or repercussions.



A Bailey employee plants natives purchased at Yamhill SWCD's annual native plant sale. PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY NURSERIES

Going through this process, I don't feel that way anymore. Every agency I worked with was supportive and recognized that this is the type of project they hope to see more of.

"What really stood out for me

throughout the whole process was the importance of relationships. For example, the engineer on this project was someone we had worked with several times before. He introduced us to the ecologist who ended up leading us through the entire permitting process. She helped us find the environmental consultants we needed, who had worked with the aquatic construction company that ended up removing the dams. Not to mention our long-standing relationship with Yamhill Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), and how they introduced us to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's (OWEB's) Small Grant Program that helped fund the project. I truly feel that without these relationships, the project would not have been as successful."

Historic aerial photos from the Army Corps of Engineers, taken in 1936, provided a reference for the natural condition of Salt Creek before dams and reservoirs were

constructed. The removal of the North and South dams happened within 2.5 weeks of each other. The North Dam footprint required a stream channel to be constructed through the old pond area, creating a total of 12,520 square feet of wetland.

The South Dam removal created an additional 1,660 square feet of wetland with a combined 2.5 miles of Salt Creek now accessible for fish passage. Enhancements such as contouring the streambank and establishing riparian plants are designed to support and encourage beavers to move in and take over the river engineering. Beaver dams and lodges slow the flow of water while maintaining fish and water passage.

Re-routing the container yard drain tiles to an off-channel pond and removing the dams on Salt Creek has significantly improved water quality by reducing erosion and limiting sediment, fertilizers, and pesticides from entering the stream. Thies

has created healthier conditions for aquatic life and folks enjoying downstream parks on hot summer days. Another benefit is that spring and fall flooding has decreased, keeping local roads accessible for the community.

### Bailey's work toward sustainability

Building a sustainable future is something Bailey is working to build as a core part of the company culture. A company-wide committee geared toward sustainability works on projects that help Bailey be a positive influence on local communities and continue to make the right decisions.

Last year's initiatives include participating in Adopt-A-Highway programs at all of their locations, implementing an employee plastic recycling program, and looking into alternative fuels and ways to build resilience for water use.



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Water in the creek flows through the area where the South Dam was and downstream past Bailey Nurseries property towards the North Yamhill River in the distance. PHOTO COURTESY OF BAILEY NURSERIES

### Partners in conservation

Soil and Water Conservation Districts work with local landowners to guide them through the process of restoration and conservation projects. Yamhill SWCD has also worked with **Monrovia Nursery Company** and Native Habitat Nursery in the area, utilizing OWEB Small Grants and the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Pesticide Stewardship Partnership program.

"Yamhill SWCD provides local leadership in conserving, restoring, and protecting water and soil, wildlife habitat, and other natural resources in Yamhill County," Anderson said. "Through technical and financial assistance, Yamhill SWCD helps citizens, landowners, and businesses utilize best practices, find solutions, and realize conservation goals. Over the past decade, the district has worked with nurseries to implement a variety of projects, including dam removal, native pollinator hedgerows, high-tunnel installations, water storage, and irrigation efficiency. In addition, Yamhill SWCD has facilitated nursery educational workshops on plant health and pest prevention."

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) is an independent Oregon

state agency that provides grants to help protect and restore healthy watersheds and natural habitats that support thriving communities and strong economies. OWEB was created to support the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds, which envisions state and local partners working together with private landowners to collaboratively achieve the state's water quality, fish, and wildlife goals. Funding for OWEB grants comes from the Oregon Lottery and other state sources, along with federal Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

OWEB distributes grant funding through local partners like Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Watershed Councils. If a nursery is interested in completing a restoration or conservation project and exploring grant funding available, the local SWCD or WC is an excellent first point of contact. SWCDs and WCs work together with other local partners to administer the small grants program in each of their communities.

"OWEB's Small Grants Program is meant to help fund 'small acts of kindness,' to improve watershed health," said Theresa

DeBardelaben, OWEB's Small Grant Program Coordinator. Small Grant projects are short, streamlined projects that are easily implemented on the ground — they benefit water quality, water quantity, and fish and wildlife habitat. These projects can be approved for funding in as little as a month. Recent updates to the program have widened the eligibility for organizations to apply for small grant projects up to \$20,000.

If you are interested in restoration or conservation projects, reach out to your local Soil and Water Conservation District, Watershed Council, or non-profit organization to talk about resource concerns and project ideas. ©

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*Linda Repplinger has been serving as the publications specialist at the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board since 2022. In this role, she enthusiastically shares the numerous benefits of Oregon's watersheds and is dedicated to highlighting the achievements of grantees and partners who are actively involved in on-the-ground restoration efforts. Her love for Oregon landscapes stems from growing up on a farm in the Willamette Valley. She can be reached at [Linda.Repplinger@oweb.oregon.gov](mailto:Linda.Repplinger@oweb.oregon.gov)*