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**Contact**

Danny Palmerlee, Communications Director  
(503) 241-0151  
[dpalmerlee@westernrivers.org](mailto:dpalmerlee@westernrivers.org)  
Western Rivers Conservancy

## **The West's Leader in Riverland Conservation Celebrates 30 Years of Saving Rivers**

PORTLAND, OR – This month, Western Rivers Conservancy, the only organization dedicated exclusively to saving the West's great rivers through land acquisition, is turning 30.

At a time when rivers and the public's ability to get to them are increasingly under threat, WRC's work is more important than ever.

WRC has created state parks, county parks and nature reserves. It has expanded national wildlife refuges, national conservation areas, wilderness study areas and Wild and Scenic River corridors. And it has repatriated sacred homelands to Native American tribes that share WRC's conservation vision for some of the West's greatest rivers.

Over the course of its first 30 years, WRC has conserved over 162,000 acres along 179 rivers and streams across the West, including headwater tributaries, confluences, side-channels, waterfalls, wetlands, meadows and estuaries.

Yet WRC's accomplishments in acres and numbers tell only part of the story.

"We develop projects that really let us maximize our impact," said Western Rivers Conservancy President, Sue Doroff. "We buy lands to protect key sources of cold water that nourish our rivers, or lands that allow us to return vital water to streams for fish and wildlife. In every case, we ask ourselves, how will protecting this 5,000-acre property or that 15,000-acre ranch benefit the river as a whole? When we find those places that are critical to the entire river, we find a way to conserve them."

WRC's priority is preserving rivers and the life that depends on them, though its work almost always delivers public access as well. Its projects have safeguarded trailheads and trails; access for anglers, boaters and hunters; places to camp and hike; and access to vast, otherwise inaccessible public lands connected to our rivers.

"Whenever public access is compatible with conservation, we create it," said Doroff. "We want people to be able to experience, explore and enjoy the great rivers of the West."

This work is crucial, especially as more and more Americans seek to maintain the country's rich heritage of public land and ensure future generations have access to our rivers, mountains and open spaces.

### **A Pioneer in Conservation Finance**

Although competition for public funding for land conservation has intensified in recent years, WRC has been able to broaden its impact year after year.

What began with a team of two in 1988 has grown to a staff of 19 today, and WRC now has offices in Portland, Denver, San Francisco and Olympia. Today its projects are some of the most important and challenging in the West.

“Western Rivers Conservancy is pioneering new ground when it comes to conservation finance,” said Doroff. “We’re tapping complex, nontraditional funding sources like the federal New Markets Tax Credits Program and California’s carbon market in order to finance projects that are large in scale and of tremendous importance when it comes to river conservation. It requires a high level of sophistication, diverse resources and a willingness to take risks, all the things that make WRC unique.”

It is this approach, along with an experienced staff and an engaged and generous board of directors, which has kept WRC at the forefront of riverland conservation for 30 years.

### **Highlights and Accomplishments**

Over the past three decades, WRC has had a profound impact on the West, from both a conservation perspective and when it comes to access for people.

- In 2018, WRC completed its historic effort to create the Blue Creek Salmon Sanctuary and Yurok Tribal Community Forest on **California’s Klamath River**. The effort conserved over 47,000 acres of temperate rainforest in the heart of redwood country and will help save some of the greatest runs of salmon left in the West. It is a project of immense importance for imperiled species like the marbled murrelet and for the Yurok people, who will regain the crown jewel of their spiritual homeland.
- This spring, on **Colorado’s upper Rio Grande** WRC created the 17,000-acre San Luis Hills State Wildlife Area, protecting vast open space and creating access to the river in a county with virtually no public land. Throughout the San Luis Valley, WRC is protecting vital habitat for fish, birds and other wildlife, while creating river access to prime reaches of the Rio Grande and its tributaries.
- In 2013, WRC protected 16 miles of **Oregon’s John Day River** by creating Cottonwood Canyon State Park, Oregon’s second largest state park. WRC is now conserving an additional 10 miles of the John Day and nine miles of **Thirtymile Creek**, the most important cold-water tributary on the lower John Day and a lifeline for one of the healthiest runs of wild steelhead in the Pacific Northwest. The current effort is safeguarding the only public overland access to an otherwise inaccessible 70-mile stretch of the John Day Wild and Scenic River corridor.
- In 2008, following three years of work, WRC helped secure the health of **California’s Smith River** by protecting Goose Creek, one of the most important sources of cold water

for the entire system. The Smith is California's finest wild river and the capstone of the nation's Wild and Scenic River system.

- In 2002, WRC protected fishing access at one of the West's most fabled stretches of trout water—Three Dollar Bridge on **Montana's Madison River**—by acquiring a crucial property to prevent this cherished site from closing to the public.
- Beginning in 2001, WRC acquired and protected all of the private industrial timberland along the lower 30 miles of Washington's Hoh River, creating a 7,000-acre conservation and recreation corridor between Olympic National Park and the Pacific. These lands were managed by the Hoh River Trust, which WRC created in partnership with the Wild Salmon Center in 2004. In 2017, WRC, HRT and The Nature Conservancy formed a partnership to expand the corridor to more than 10,000 acres. Today these lands remain open to all, free of charge.
- Since 1999, WRC has been working in Portland's backyard to create a conservation and recreation corridor along 17 miles of **Oregon's Sandy River** and its tributaries. When Portland General Electric set out to remove two dams in the Sandy system, WRC partnered with the company to protect 4,500 acres of PGE land for the benefit of fish, wildlife and people. Today, the Sandy is entirely free-flowing, and WRC has conserved nearly 5,000 acres of riverland along the Sandy, Little Sandy and Bull Run rivers.

## Looking Forward

Today, Western Rivers Conservancy's efforts are among the most important conservation projects in the West.

- In **Idaho**, WRC is preserving cold, high-elevation tributaries that flow to the Salmon River and provide crucial spawning and rearing habitat for salmon, steelhead and bull trout.
- Above the shores of **Washington's** Lake Wenatchee and Nason Creek, WRC is working to save vital fish and wildlife habitat and a cherished network of trails by permanently protecting a 3,714-acre stand of forestland.
- In **Arizona**, WRC is conserving a key reach of the East Verde River and safeguarding prime access to the Mazatzal Wilderness. The East Verde is the largest, cleanest tributary to the Verde River, one of the few perennially flowing lifelines on of the Sonoran Desert.
- On **Oregon's** Wild and Scenic North Umpqua River, WRC is working to protect outstanding fishing and wildlife habitat and key public access points along the North Umpqua Trail.
- In the San Luis Valley in **Colorado**, WRC is creating new public access for anglers, hikers, boaters, birders and other recreationists, while protecting prime habitat for the valley's diverse bird species and other wildlife.
- In northern **California**, WRC is working to preserve a critical reach of South Fork Antelope Creek, a crucial spawning and rearing stream for Sacramento River salmon and steelhead. To the south, WRC is about to complete conservation of a rare reach of the Mojave River, where it flows above ground and creates a true oasis in the Mojave Desert.

“Nowhere else in the world will you find rivers like those we are lucky enough to have in the American West,” said Doroff. “Of course, they’re not just beautiful, they are the lifeblood of the West, crucial to fish and wildlife and central to who we are as inhabitants of this remarkable place. Without free-flowing, healthy rivers, we would have little else.”

It is this knowledge of the importance of rivers, and the belief that they are worth protecting at all costs, that has kept Western Rivers Conservancy going strong for 30 years. Today, WRC has more than 25 active projects on rivers across the West.

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