

News Release

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Western Rivers Conservancy and the Colville Tribes Repatriate Ancestral Lands and Deliver Life-Giving Water for Okanogan River Steelhead

OKANOGAN COUNTY, Washington — Yesterday, Western Rivers Conservancy and the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation permanently conserved the 2,524-acre Antoine Valley Ranch, returning ancestral lands to the Colville Tribes and delivering desperately needed water to Antoine Creek and its imperiled run of Okanogan River steelhead.

Antoine Valley Ranch spans 2.5 miles of Antoine Creek, a critical spawning stream for threatened summer steelhead that flows through the ancestral homelands of the Colville Tribes. For decades, this Columbia River tributary has run too low and warm for steelhead to survive and spawn.

“The repatriation of these lands to the Colville Tribes represents a great step forward for the original stewards of this part of the Okanogan River valley while making significant gains for an irreplaceable run of steelhead that depend on Antoine Creek for survival,” said Jarred-Michael Erickson, Chairman of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation

In an effort to revive this critical stream, WRC purchased the ranch in 2020 and transferred half of it to the Colville that year with funding from the Washington Department of Ecology’s Streamflow Restoration Program. WRC held the second half of the property while working to secure additional funding from the Streamflow Restoration Program to permanently protect the remainder of the ranch.

Yesterday, WRC and the Colville Tribes successfully transferred the second half of the ranch into Colville ownership. WRC conveyed the ranch’s water rights to the Department of Ecology to be managed in partnership with the Colville Tribes for the benefit of Antoine Creek. Trout Unlimited assisted with dedicating the ranch’s water rights in-stream.

“We are very proud of what we were able to accomplish for Washington’s fish and wildlife, for streamflow on Antoine Creek, and for the people of the Okanogan River valley, all by working in partnership with the Colville Tribes and Western Rivers Conservancy,” said Vanessa Brinkhuis, the Washington Department of Ecology Streamflow Restoration Grant Unit Supervisor.

Yesterday's conveyance includes Fanchers Dam, Washington's second largest earthen dam and the key to reviving Antoine Creek. The dam sits on a separate upstream parcel, above natural barriers to steelhead. Because it does not impede steelhead migration, it will be left in place so tribal fishery managers can use it to strategically pulse cold flows downstream when fish need water the most.

The strategy will provide flow increases of up to 90 percent in Antoine Creek, calibrated to match seasonal needs of the steelhead that spawn in the stream. Importantly, the flow improvements in Antoine Creek will continue downstream into the Okanogan and Columbia Rivers.

"Trout Unlimited is honored to be able to bring our expertise in returning water in-stream in Washington to support the efforts of the Colville Tribes and Western Rivers Conservancy to restore steelhead to Antoine Creek and the Okanogan River," said Theo Burgoon, Trout Unlimited's Eastern Washington Director.

In the coming years, the Colville Tribes also plan to conduct extensive in-stream, riparian and upland habitat restoration, benefitting the full range of species found on the ranch.

Antoine Valley Ranch lies within the traditional territories of the Colville Tribes, who have inhabited this area for millennia. It was part of the original Colville Reservation but was ceded to the United States when the reservation was reduced in size by Congress in 1872. The Colville Tribes have sought to acquire the ranch for over a decade, making this property an especially important acquisition.

"We are incredibly proud to partner with the Colville Tribes on this innovative project," said Nelson Mathews, Vice President of Western Rivers Conservancy. "Using a dam designed to take water out of the creek as a tool for putting water back into it is unconventional, but the benefits for Okanogan steelhead will be game-changing. The project confirms our belief that land acquisition and great partnerships with Tribal Nations like the Colville can make a profoundly positive, permanent difference for fish and wildlife."

Conservation of Antoine Valley Ranch was made possible by the Washington Department of Ecology's Streamflow Restoration Grant Program, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Giles W. and Elise G. Mead Foundation, James M. Lea Foundation, Hugh and Jane Ferguson Foundation and individual donors. WRC's efforts at Antoine Creek have also received pivotal support from Trout Unlimited.

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ABOUT

About the Colville Tribes

Today, more than 9,240 descendants of 12 aboriginal tribes of Indians are enrolled in the Confederated Tribes of the Colville. The twelve tribes which compose the Confederated Tribes

of the Colville Reservation include: ščə́láməx^w (deep water) or Chelan; wal'wáma (Wallowa people) or Chief Joseph Band of Nez Perce; sǎ́w'γ'itp (sharp pointed trees) or Colville; šntíyátk^wəx^w (grass in the water) or Entiat; sn'áycst (speckled fish) or Lakes; mətx^wu (blunt hills around a valley) or Methow; škwáxcənəx^w (people living on the bank) or Moses-Columbia; nspilm (prairie) or Nespelem; uknaqin (seeing over the top) or Okanogan; palúšpam (people from Palouse) or Palus; sənp'ɣ'w'lx (grey mist as far as one can see) or San Poil, and šnpəšq^wáw'səx^w (people in between) or Wenatchi. To learn more, visit www.colvilletribes.com.

About Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy acquires lands along rivers throughout the West to conserve critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By cooperating with local agencies and organizations and by applying decades of land acquisition experience, WRC secures the health of whole ecosystems. WRC has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers including the Hoh, Methow, Nisqually, John Day, Salmon, Snake, North Umpqua and Madison Rivers. To learn more, visit www.westernrivers.org.

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