

# Tribal Wetland Program Development

By Bryan Duggan  
Water and Environmental Specialist

In June 2010 the Coquille Indian Tribe was awarded a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Wetland Program Development Grant, to help facilitate the development of a tribal Wetland Management Plan. The development of a tribal Wetland Management Plan (WMP) shall guide the Tribe's Biological and Environmental Services program in identifying, managing and protecting tribal wetland resources on all tribal trust lands.

What are wetlands though, and why are they worthy of our protection? For regulatory purposes under the Clean Water Act, the term wetlands means "those areas that are inundated or saturated by surface or groundwater at a frequency and duration sufficient to support, and that under normal circumstances do support, a prevalence of vegetation typically adapted for life in saturated soil conditions." Wetlands vary widely because of regional and local differences in soils, topography, climate, hydrology, water chemistry, vegetation, and other factors, including human disturbance. Wetlands generally include swamps, marshes, bogs and similar areas.

According to the EPA: "wetlands are important elements of a watershed because they serve as a link between land and water resources, often combining to form a complex, dynamic physical and biological system that supports a multitude of resources." Wetlands are considered the most biologically diverse of all ecosystems; and properly functioning, wetlands can prevent non-point source pollution from degrading water quality, provide critical habitat for wildlife, serve as natural wastewater purification systems, and provide a degree of erosion and flood control in alluvial river systems.

Historically wetlands have been the victim of large scale draining efforts for real estate and agricultural developments; to date; over half of the world's wetlands had been drained. Wetlands provide an important flood control function, and are very effective at filtering and cleaning water pollution. To replace these wetland ecosystem services, enormous amounts of money have been spent on water purification plants and flood control remediation measures. As our understanding of wetland functionality increases, we can reduce these costs to ourselves and our children by protecting existing wetlands and working towards the restoration of wetland ecosystems where appropriate.

Tribal wetland inventories conducted in 1998 and 2000 found twenty five wetlands of approximately 12 acres on the Empire Reservation, inclusive of all four watersheds (First, Second, Fourth and Tarheel Creeks). Since then, the Tribe has done little else to improve or assess wetland resources ever since these initial inventories 10 years ago. The development of a tribal WMP shall be an important capacity building component of the Tribe's ability to identify wetland resources on Tribal Lands that so often hold and support culturally significant flora and fauna. 20 of the 44 culturally significant flora specifically identified in the Tribe's "Cultural Resources Found in the Vicinity of the Coquille Forest" are deemed to be wetland plants or associated with wetlands. Wetlands are also valued by the Tribe for their importance in maintaining the ecological functionality of salmonid and lamprey stream systems, well documented traditional food sources for the Tribe.

As the Tribe considers future commercial and residential development opportunities for Tribal Lands, it becomes important for the tribal Land Resources and Environmental Services staff to develop clear and consistent strategies for the protection and restoration of wetland resources; particularly ahead of the greater development plans to avoid caustic mitigation measures after the fact.

As part of our efforts to identify lost wetlands, the BES staff will be collecting antidotal information and oral histories from tribal members and elders of the presence of past wetlands on tribal lands. Do you have memories of playing, working, or harvesting resources on the small creeks in the Empire area? Do you remember where and when an area or favorite creek was different; perhaps there was a favorite spot that you or a family member frequented that yielded culturally significant plants? We would

love to hear your stories and record your knowledge of past local conditions. Please contact either myself or someone else in the LRES department to set up a time to meet.