

# Natural Infrastructure in Oregon

## Common Challenges, Opportunities for Action, and Case Studies

Photo by The Freshwater Trust

A new report from [Oregon Environmental Council](#) and [Willamette Partnership](#) demonstrates the opportunity to invest in natural infrastructure as a solution to Oregon's infrastructure challenges.

### A NATURAL APPROACH TO INFRASTRUCTURE

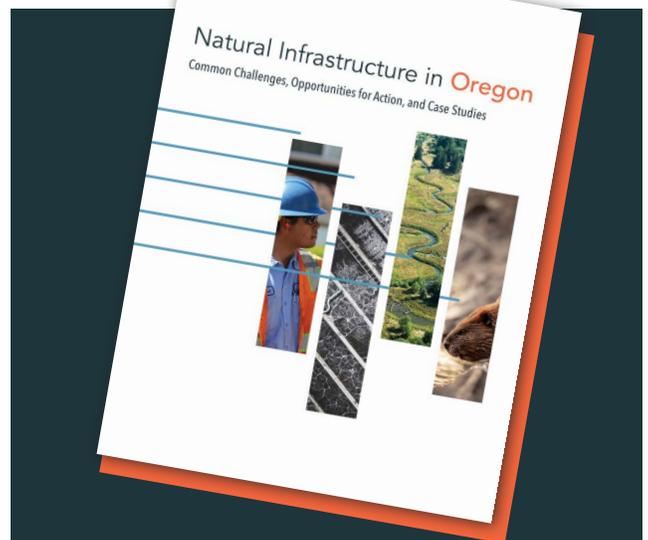
When we think of infrastructure, we often imagine the roads, bridges, pipes, and cement of "built" or "grey" infrastructure. However, built infrastructure is not the only type of infrastructure on which we depend.

Natural infrastructure is the strategic use of natural lands, such as forests and wetlands, and working lands, such as farms and ranches, in addition to built infrastructure like concrete walls or steel pipes. Natural infrastructure can also mimic natural systems to achieve desired outcomes, like protecting homes from flooding.

Across the state, Oregonians face complex water challenges. Aging water infrastructure is failing in many communities; in others, the infrastructure is simply inadequate for meeting a growing population's needs. Changing precipitation patterns and land-use pressures further exacerbate existing water challenges. Water is increasingly scarce, more polluted, less seasonally reliable, and the future seems to hold more of the same.

We need to embrace and implement creative responses to the water challenges that have been building for decades. Incorporating nature into water management can address these challenges head-on while also supporting prosperous communities and healthy ecosystems. With their direct and associated co-benefits, natural infrastructure approaches will be a crucial component of Oregon's water future.

### WHAT KIND OF BENEFITS?



### WHAT YOU'LL FIND

In this report you'll find -

- An overview of what natural infrastructure is,
- Natural infrastructure policy including the common challenges and opportunities,
- Case study examples of natural infrastructure in practice, and
- A call to action for natural infrastructure investment in Oregon

This report was a collaborative effort amongst partners across Oregon.

## OREGON IS A LEADER IN NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Cities, utilities, landowners, and watershed partners across the state are already proving that a natural infrastructure approach is an affordable and effective way to help us meet water quality standards, protect drinking water sources, and restore healthy habitats for Oregonians today and in the future.

We spoke to regional natural infrastructure champions about what makes these projects possible, why this is the pathway to a more resilient water future, and what Oregon needs to make these approaches an even more viable option for communities and watershed partners across the state.

Several themes emerged from these conversations:

1. Human and natural systems are inextricably linked, and we can lean on natural systems to keep our water clean and ensure ample water supplies;
2. Community engagement and outreach is essential for designing and implementing an equitable and meaningful project;
3. We need to continue studying and managing risk while also calculating how natural infrastructure grows in value over time; and finally
4. Natural infrastructure projects would benefit from more collaboration and prioritization by governmental agencies, organizations, and infrastructure providers.

These themes call for a paradigm shift in how we think about infrastructure.



*Photo of Prineville Wetlands,  
City of Prineville*

### CALL TO ACTION

Oregon's current water infrastructure challenges present a unique opportunity for choosing our path forward. Will we keep trying to solve problems in ways that aren't suited for our current needs and circumstances, or will we champion innovative solutions that work for our communities and the environments in which they live? Natural infrastructure is a winning solution that's already working in communities across the state, and we can make sure more people live in a healthier, more equitable Oregon by prioritizing these natural, cost-saving solutions.

Natural infrastructure solutions require professionals from diverse fields working together as a team. One of the most effective ways to overcome policy barriers and encourage innovation is to improve relationships and increase collaboration and communication between regulatory agencies and infrastructure providers. When paired with additional resources and capacity, Oregon can continue to lead and inspire creative and effective infrastructure solutions across the country.

From engineers to policy makers and everyone in between, we want you to join us in advocating for natural infrastructure as a solution to Oregon's water infrastructure challenges. We want you to help us educate communities and agencies about the health, environmental, and economic benefits of using natural infrastructure. We want you to help us shift policy so that natural infrastructure solutions get priority placement in community projects around the state. And we want you to be a part of our coalition calling for innovative solutions that make our communities more resilient to the challenges ahead, so that future generations can thrive in this place we call home.

**You can find the full report and more information on natural infrastructure at -**  
[www.willamettepartnership.org/natural-infra-report](http://www.willamettepartnership.org/natural-infra-report)

This report was prepared by Willamette Partnership and  
Oregon Environmental Council

