

*A year of response, recovery, and resiliency*



# Annual Report

July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025

## **Wheeler Soil & Water Conservation District**



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# Board of Directors

Wheeler Soil and Water Conservation District is led by a seven member board. Directors are elected by the electorate of Wheeler County at the November General Election, which is held during even-numbered years. The Wheeler SWCD Board may appoint a person to fill a board vacancy between elections for the duration of that position's term. Five of the seven positions are classified as zone positions and the other two positions are at-large positions. Director Emeritus and Associate Directors are appointed by the Board to serve two-year terms and do not vote on Board decisions, but are expected to augment the Board's knowledge and experience level and assist with District programs and activities.

## Directors

Zone 1 (2026) David Hunt  
Zone 2 (2028) Anna Thomas, *Vice Chair*  
Zone 3 (2028) Jason Davis, *Sec./Treasurer*  
Zone 4 (2028) Zachery Bruce  
Zone 5 (2026) Brent Johnson  
At-Large 1 (2026) James Collins, *Chair*  
At-Large 2 (2028) Ross Ryno

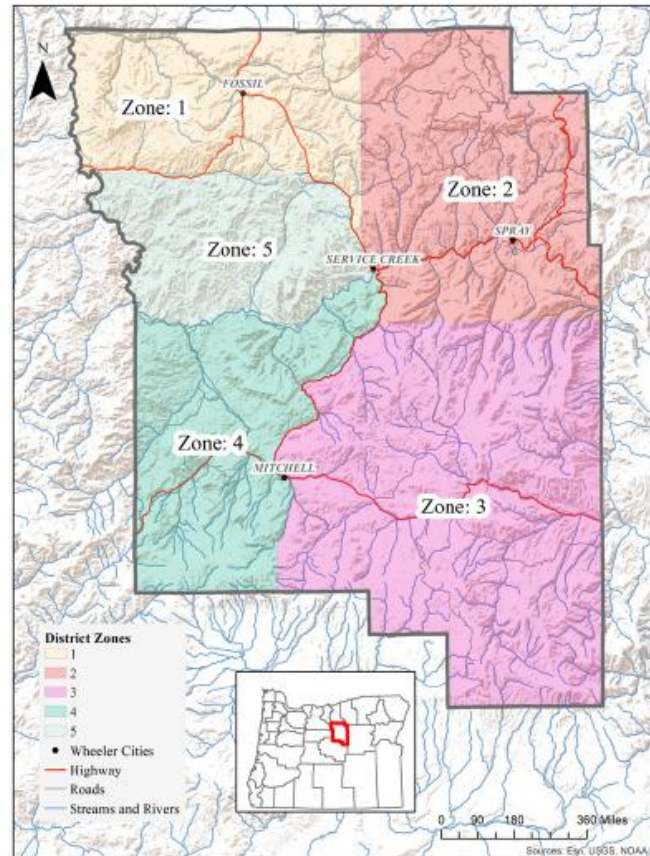
## Director Emeritus

Ted Molinari  
Jeremiah Holmes

## Associate Directors

*None*

***The District appreciates the dedicated service, tireless commitment, and good governance to the staff and landowners!***



## Who We Are and What We Do

Wheeler Soil and Water Conservation District is one of 45 districts in Oregon. Conservation districts are defined by Oregon Revised Statutes (ORS) as political subdivisions of state government. The District is not a state agency; rather, it is classified as a special district, a form of local government which is required to follow many of the same laws that govern state agencies. It is specifically governed by ORS 568 and led by a locally elected board of directors.

The District is responsible for conservation project planning, technical assistance, and grant writing for individuals and groups in Wheeler County. The work is accomplished by successfully engaging funding sources and creating partnerships with other agencies and landowners. Wheeler SWCD is also responsible for public education and outreach, project oversight, and serves as the Local Management Agency for the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Ag Water Quality Program.

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# Financial Statement

*Wheeler Soil and Water Conservation District does not levy taxes and is 100% grant funded.*

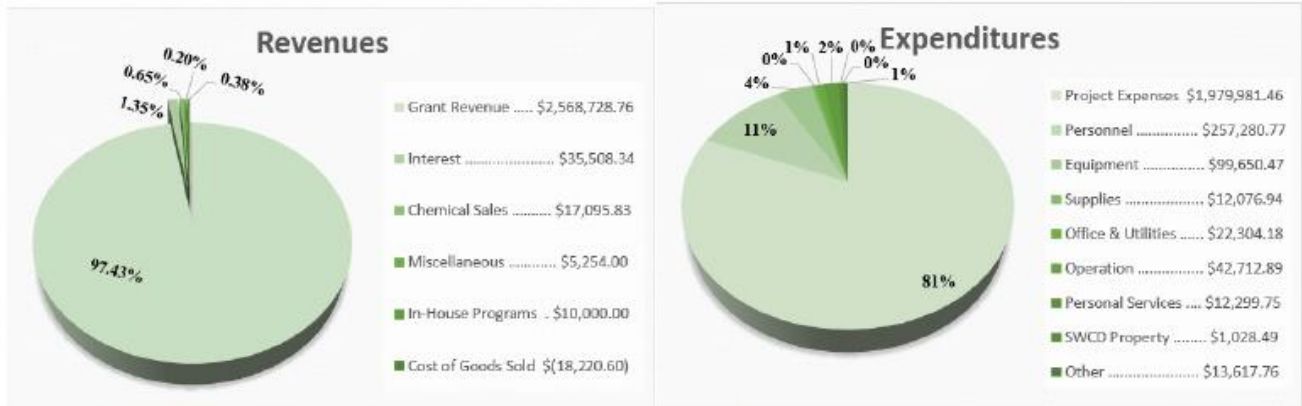
All funds obtained by conservation districts, regardless of the source, are public funds, whether they come from public or private sources including grants.

Due to not levying ad valorem tax, Wheeler SWCD is not required to abide by the Local Budget Law of ORS 294.305-294.565. However, Wheeler SWCD prepares an annual budget which is adopted by the Board of Directors and follows the same guiding principles as the Local Budget Law. Directors have a fiduciary responsibility to ensure that these public funds are expended in a proper and lawful manner.

Oregon conservation districts are legal subdivisions of the state, and are subject to the Municipal Audit Law in ORS 297.405-297.555.

Per ORS 568.610, Wheeler SWCD completes a full audit annually. To view a full copy of the annual budget or audit, please visit the District's website or contact the office.

[www.wheelerswcd.org/annual-budget-audits](http://www.wheelerswcd.org/annual-budget-audits)  
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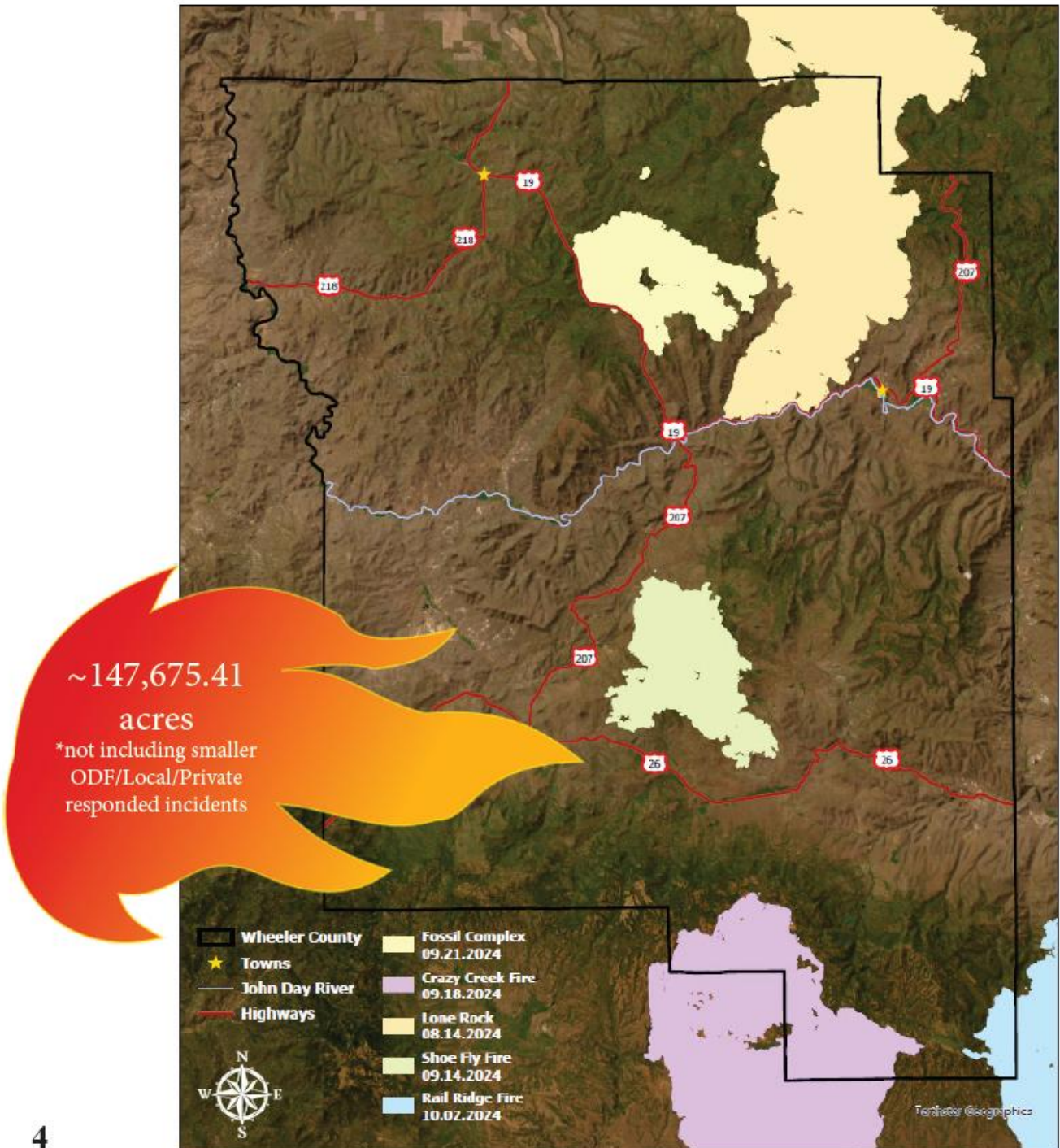
# 2024 WILDFIRE OVERVIEW

The 2024 wildfire season was a record setting experience in Wheeler County. Countless sleepless nights and unprecedented hours of work put in by our unpaid volunteers and land-owners fighting to save our livelihoods and treasured landscapes.

It can take months, and even years, to recover from the emotional, financial, and ecological impacts of catastrophic wildfire. The healing process for a community requires extensive resources and support.

Landscape stabilization and rebuilding homes and communities following wildfire can be stressful and overwhelming. While immediate action is needed to address landscape rehabilitation, infrastructure repairs, post-fire flooding mitigation, and restoration, long-term care is required to ensure personal well-being, financial stability, community health, and a renewed sense of place.

Wheeler SWCD is here to support all facets of recovery and resilience!

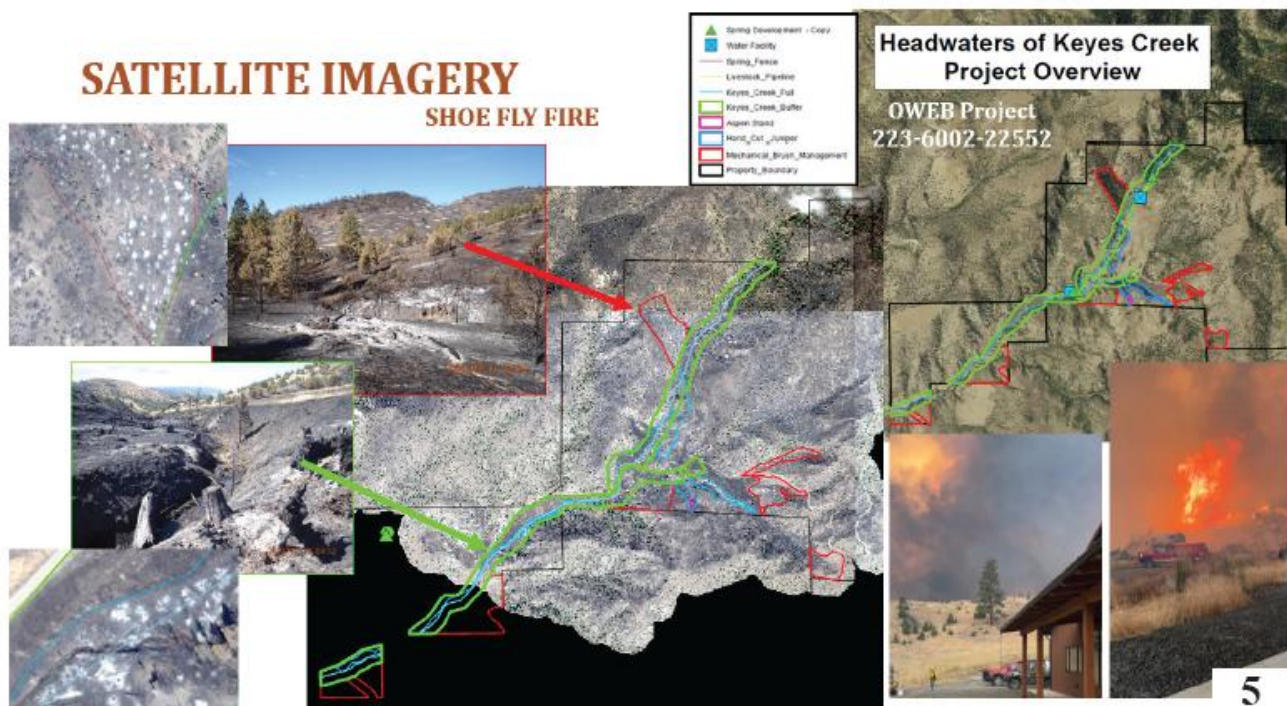


# When the suppression team leaves...

## the SWCD's work begins!

Wheeler SWCD acted immediately, before the fires were even contained. We partnered with USDA, Gilliam SWCD, and others across the John Day Basin to find all available resources for our landowners. Some of the highlights of our efforts are outlined below.

- Wheeler SWCD built a website to centralize all resources and deadlines pertaining to wildfire recovery - <https://www.wheelerswcd.org/2024-wildfires>
- SWCD and USDA staff distributed producer packets with maps and disaster program information
- Worked with Gilliam SWCD to obtain satellite imagery
- Communicated with funders of open projects affected
- Hosted multiple community events and presentations to get information out to landowners and the public
- Collaborated with partners on strategic approach for post-fire restoration actions through a basin-wide OWEB Fire TA grant offering
- Assisted ODF teams with landowner communications for suppression repairs
- Communicated feasibility of virtual fence options with landowners
- Assisted landowners with over 58 USDA applications for emergency disaster funding
- Partnered with AgWest Farm Credit to make USDA funding accessible to smaller landowners through one-time installment loans with proof of signed USDA contract
- Submitted a FEMA grant application in partnership with Wheeler County for fire mitigation
- Submitted a Department of Interior grant application in partnership with Wheeler County Fire & Rescue and the Wheeler County Sheriff for 14 slip-tanks, radios, and tools to be distributed to private landowners across Wheeler County for decreased response time and initial attack
- Submitted multiple single and multiple landowner grant applications for recovery



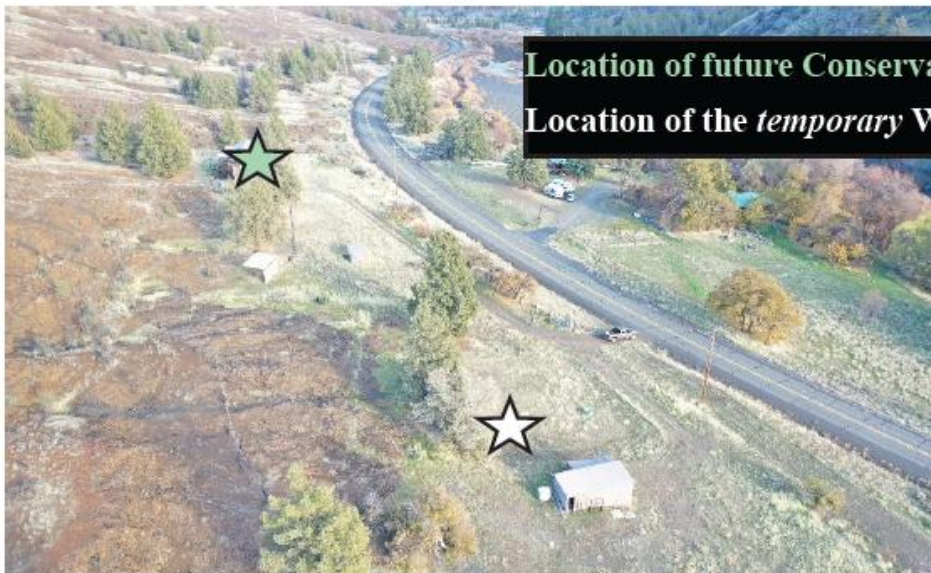
# Conservation Community Center Update

Wheeler SWCD submitted another application in 2024 for FY25 Congressional Direct Spending, which we were partially awarded. However, on Friday, March 14, 2025, Congress passed a Continuing Resolution keeping the government funded until September 30, 2025. This had the effect of eliminating all community-initiated projects (CIPs), also known as community project funding or congressionally directed spending, that were included in the Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) Senate Bills.

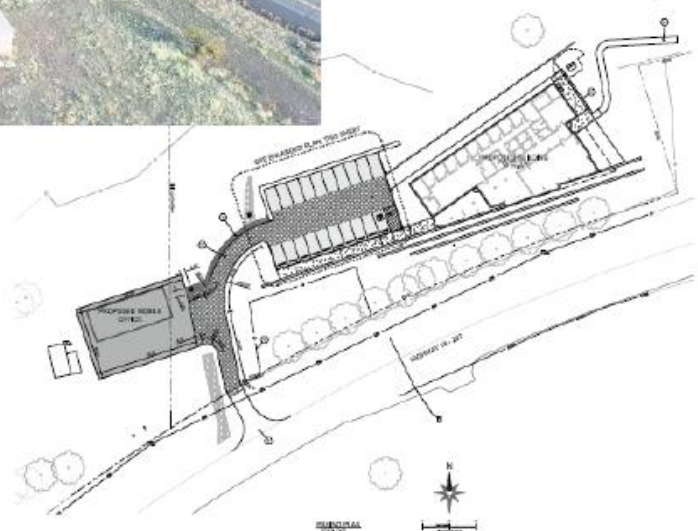
With this news, and other difficulties that staff faced, Wheeler SWCD Board of Directors moved to utilize general fund dollars to install utilities and put a modular office on the District's property to serve employees until funding could be secured for the Conservation Community Center project. As the fiscal year came to an end, staff were working diligently with the project team to get revised designs, line up permits, and obtain contractors to get this temporary office project underway.

Wheeler SWCD continues to seek funding opportunities for construction funding to bring the Conservation Community Center project to fruition. Despite the initial funding award closing, the project team remains united and eager to stay focused on bringing resources to Wheeler County resident and economy!

There are discussions for a much needed use for the modular office once the Center is constructed.... stay tuned!



**Location of future Conservation Community Center.**  
**Location of the temporary Wheeler SWCD office!**



## 2024-2025 Key Accomplishments by the Numbers

**192 partner-  
ship meetings**

**8 spring developments  
w/ 2,970 feet of pipe**

**688 acres of  
forest stand  
improvement**

**476 acres of  
Juniper  
removed  
1,840**

**landowner  
technical  
assistance  
contacts**

**42 funding  
applications  
submitted**

**227 on-site  
technical  
assistance  
visits**

**57.16 acres of  
riparian forest buffers  
249 acres of noxious  
weed treatment**

**41,544 feet of  
fence installed  
2,495 acres of  
seed planted**

**146 USDA  
assisted contracts**

**19,122 feet of  
wildlife obstruction  
removal**

**182 acres of woody  
residue treatment**

**20 conservation  
plans written**

Thank you to our wonderful landowners,  
partners, and funders!

# Wheeler Weed Warriors (3WP)

Wheeler SWCD restructured the in-house cost-share program to remove the acre-owned restriction and eliminate the funding cycles. Applications are now accepted year-round to all landowners/managers in Wheeler County. One application was received and funded in full during 2024-2025.



**OISC** Wheeler SWCD was awarded a grant to provide noxious weed education and outreach to the public which provided funding for event supplies, printing of additional copies of the Wheeler SWCD Noxious Weed Guidebook, design/create noxious weed identification cards, update the 3WP documents, and update/improve the noxious weed education trailer.

## Treatment Spotlight!

Tree of heaven, a noxious weed and invasive tree, is making an indelible mark on the Pacific Northwest. Cassi submitted a grant application to ODA that would have attempted to eradicate tree-of-heaven in Wheeler County, but was denied.

Kristen and Cassi worked with BLM and other partners to conduct treatment on 1.5 acre infestation located at the BLM Locust Grove Campground with funding provided by BLM. There was a variety of sizes, saplings, male and female that were fully treated via three methods to determine success rates of the known methods.



- On 08/28/2024, the smaller saplings that had spread outside the main infestation were treated with a foliar treatment of Cimmaron, which proved to be effective, as all had succumbed to the chemical treatment.
- On 08/28/2024, one section of mature trees was treated via hack and squirt method with the chemical Vastlan. Last monitoring showed signs of distress with a lot of the trees but the larger ones still showing some signs of life.
- On 10/02/2024, the other section was treated via basal bark method with the chemical Garlon XRT and brush/basal oil. This treatment didn't work as well as the hack and squirt method, a lot of smaller diameter trees showed signs of distress; however, the larger diameter trees did not.



Monitoring is ongoing at this infestation site and a follow-up treatment is scheduled in late-summer of 2026 with intentions of cutting and burning in place once trees succumb to treatment.

### Other Successes

- 239 acres treated through grant funds
- 10 acres treated through 3WP in-house
- Over 4,500 acres surveyed
- 400 Russian knapweed gall wasps released
- Multiple biological control sites monitored

# Regional Conservation Partnership Program

Wheeler SWCD submitted the application for the Greater Waterman Landscape Resiliency Project. The project goal was to conserve, restore, and enhance over 23,000 acres of critical range and forest lands for 92 producers in the Middle John Day Basin amongst the Top 15% of the Priority Geographies in the Oregon Landscape Resilience Plan that encompasses moderate to very high burn probability areas.

Wheeler SWCD was awarded \$21.25 million for the project. However, NRCS later informed the District that the award was rescinded as the agency is not moving forward with any new awards using the supplemental funding provided by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).

Wheeler SWCD and partners anticipate reapplying for funding through the RCPP, if/when a funding opportunity is announced in the future.



## Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

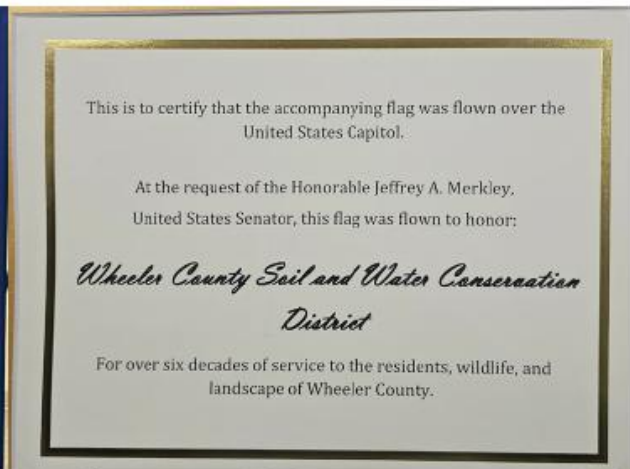
The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a voluntary program for agricultural landowners. This unique state and federal partnership allows landowners to receive incentive payments from the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) for establishing long-term, riparian buffers on eligible land. The purpose of the program is to restore, maintain, and enhance streamside areas along agricultural lands to benefit fish, wildlife, and water quality. Landowners enrolled in CREP receive annual rental payments, incentive payments, and cost share payments to implement conservation measures such as planting trees and shrubs, installing fencing, or installing livestock watering facilities.

Wheeler SWCD, FSA, and NRCS collaborate to provide CREP technical support in Wheeler County. During the fiscal year, there were 2 new contracts protecting and enhancing

125.40 acres and 4.24 miles of stream, in addition to renewing 4 contracts continuing protection of 241.32 acres and 6.02 miles of stream.

Wheeler SWCD staff provided significant assistance to producers following the 2024 wildfires that affected multiple CREP contracts in Wheeler County.





- ▶ Senator Merkley presented the District Manager with a folded flag previously flown over the US Capitol to honor Wheeler SWCD’s service to residents, wildlife, and landscape of Wheeler County, Oregon.
- ▶ Oregon’s State Conservationist (NRCS), Greg Becker presented Wheeler and Gilliam SWCDs an award of appreciation for exemplary assistance supporting producers, local communities, and the NRCS during the devastating wildfire season of 2024.
- ▶ Oregon Department of Agriculture presented Wheeler, Gilliam, Grant, and Monument SWCDs with the 2025 Cooperator Award for community wildfire response.

# Staff

Wheeler Soil and Water Conservation District is fortunate to have a dedicated team of employees with diverse experience, education, technical expertise, and administrative skills. Employees conduct outreach and education, apply for grants, assist with conservation planning, and implement projects that support fish and wildlife habitat, water quality improvement, long-term land protection, and other conservation priorities. Conservation work is accomplished in partnership with farmers, landowners, and managers, community members, schools, municipalities, volunteers, and other organizations. The District had three full-time staff and one part-time intern during 2024-2025; an Office Assistant was hired in October of 2025.

**Cassi Newton** joined Wheeler SWCD in 2019. As District Manager, her primary role is to direct the overall operations, lead staff in daily work, financial and contract management, permitting, policies, assist staff in developing projects, and administering the Education and Outreach Program.



**Kristen Neuburger**, as a Conservation Technician, leads the Weed Programs. She joined the District in 2022 and obtained her ODA Public Pesticide Applicator License in April 2023 and has worked alongside Cassi to obtain additional opportunities for Wheeler County landowners to help battle noxious weed species prevention and treatments. In addition to the Weed Program, Kristen also takes the lead on OWEB Small Grants, and assists with project development.



**Brooke Moore**, as the Conservation Technician, assists Cassi with overall project management for Wheeler SWCD since joining the District in 2019. She is our USDA Programs Lead, which includes managing the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) for Wheeler County, as well as assisting NRCS and FSA with all their programs. Brooke also takes the lead on developing holistic projects and providing technical assistance on natural resource concerns related to water and stream corridors, uplands and rangeland, and forestlands.



**Laurel Tappert** joined the District in July 2025 as a Conservation Technician. Laurel assists both Brooke and Kristen on all projects and programs while taking the lead on the Prescribed Burn Association and Firewise. She has accompanied Brooke in developing holistic projects and providing technical assistance on natural resource concerns related to water and stream corridors, uplands and rangeland, and forestlands.



**Robin Champagne** joined the District in October of 2025 as the Office Assistant. She assists Cassi and the rest of the staff with an abundance of various administrative tasks. Robin will take on the role of maintenance and groundskeeper once the SWCD relocates.



# Thank you!

**Maddy Neuburger** joined the District as a summer intern and has remained on staff part-time during her senior year at Spray High School. During the summer, she assisted with administrative tasks, digitizing historical documents, and preparing the office for the move. Maddy plans to pursue a career in early education and has been working alongside Cassi to get an education program operating for the SWCD.



## **Wheeler SWCD**

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Fossil, Oregon 97830  
541.468.2990

District Manager

*Cassi Newton*

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Conservation Technician

USDA Programs / Technician Lead

*Brooke Moore*

*brooke.moore@wheelerswcd.org*

Conservation Technician

Weed Program / Small Grant Lead

*Kristen Neuburger*

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Conservation Technician

Prescribed Burn / Firewise Lead

*Laurel Tappert*

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Office Assistant

*Robin Champagne*

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## **USDA-NRCS**

Acting District Conservationist

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## **USDA-FSA**

Executive Director in training

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