McKenzie River Post-Fire Restoration Services: Pure Water Partners Program Evaluation

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Review

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About the Pure Water Partners Program Mission

The Pure Water Partners (PWP) program mission is to "work collaboratively to protect and restore resilient ecosystems of the McKenzie Watershed for the benefit of natural and human communities."[1] The program's vision is "a future where private landowners in the McKenzie Watershed are knowledgeable and empowered to independently steward their lands for the betterment of water quality, riparian habitat, and other ecological and social values. As a result, residents live in a community that is healthy, resilient, diverse, equitable, and well-positioned for any future challenges that climate change is likely to bring." This mission informs the goals and guidelines of the program.

About the Ecosystem Workforce Program

The Ecosystem Workforce Program (EWP) is an applied social and ecological science research program at the University of Oregon. We partner with natural resource managers, policymakers, and other practitioners to provide original research, monitoring, and communication products that promote landscape and community resilience.

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1 Information is sourced from PWP's handbook, which is available by contacting the organization through their website: https://www.eweb.org/rebates-and-savings/landowner-assistance-programs/pure-water-partners

Overview

The Pure Water Partners (PWP) program is a watershed restoration program that works with nonindustrial private landowners to protect and restore riparian forests and improve water quality in the McKenzie watershed of western Oregon, the city of Eugene's sole source of drinking water. The McKenzie River is a tributary to the Willamette River. Following the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire (see Figure 1), PWP partnered with the Eugene Water & Electric Board (EWEB)'s Watershed Recovery Task Force to implement post-fire restoration activities, including revegetation, erosion control, invasive species management, and fuels reduction on properties within the fire footprint.

The PWP program provided a structure for coordinating restoration work, connecting landowners with funding and other resources to address wildfire impacts along the McKenzie River. From 2020 to 2025, the PWP program served more than 200 fire-affected landowners, pairing them with PWP staff and work crews who planned and implemented no-cost restoration activities on their properties. The program also helped participating landowners understand restoration goals, recommended practices, and ongoing maintenance needs through various types of educational support. Educational support included workshops, printed and electronic resources, and informal learning through conversations with staff. PWP staff delivered individualized assistance (such as answers to participant questions and site-specific guidance) through phone, email, and in-person consultations.

In the summer of 2025, disaster recovery funding for large-scale restoration efforts wound down in the Holiday Farm Fire footprint. Since then, the PWP program has transitioned to focus more broadly on watershed stewardship, renewed landowner engagement, and targeted restoration projects. To inform this transition, researchers from the University of Oregon's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement[2] and Ecosystem Workforce Program[3] conducted an evaluation of landowners' experiences with the program. The evaluation provides the PWP team with third-party feedback, identifying strengths and growth areas to guide future program development.

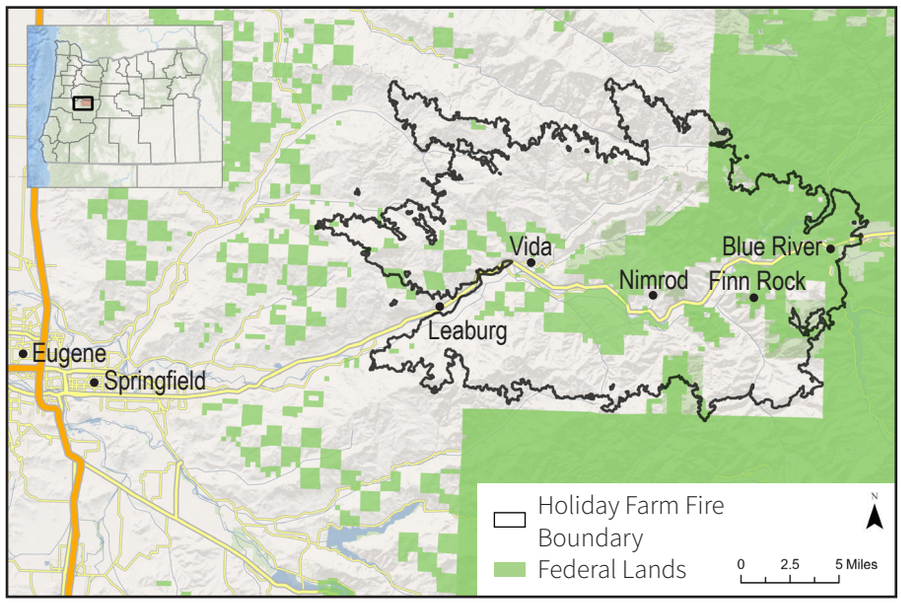

Figure 1. Map of the Holiday Farm Fire boundary, western Oregon.

Key Takeaways

This report presents results of 24 completed surveys and 12 follow-up interviews about the PWP's post-fire restoration program. Overall, study participants reported favorably and hoped for future work. They valued the restoration services and educational support delivered, felt the communication with staff was clear and responsive, and offered suggestions for future programming.

2 https://ipre.uoregon.edu/
3 https://resilient.uoregon.edu/ewp

The PWP Program Goals:

1. Maintenance and improvement of high-quality drinking water for EWEB customers, as well as other users and downstream communities that source drinking water from the Willamette River.
2. Protection and enhancement of cold water, riparian, and aquatic ecosystems to further water quality and habitat objectives.
3. Improved watershed and community resilience to climate change impacts, such as increased exposure to wildfire, drought, floods, and other natural disasters
4. Enhanced public and landowner awareness, understanding, and support for watershed conservation and restoration.
5. Collaboration to align resources to accomplish shared environmental goals more efficiently and effectively.
6. Equitable allocation of PWP resources through a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) lens that considers past and present inequities and empowers long-term stewardship.

In line with PWP's mission and goals, the program's post-fire restoration work in the McKenzie River watershed prioritized the following project activities:

- Landowner outreach and enrollment
- Riparian and floodplain assessments and management plans
- Restoration of riparian and floodplain areas
- Native revegetation for residential parcels ("naturescaping") and Firewise® recommendations
- Restoration activities that have co-benefits for social equity

The evaluation focused on the following aspects of the post-fire restoration project activities via participants' perspectives:

- Effectiveness in delivering restoration goals in alignment with landowner needs
- Efficacy and clarity of communication with PWP project managers and program staff
- Satisfaction with program goals and priorities
- Future need for PWP services, 5+ years after the Holiday Farm Fire



Approach



In 2025, PWP and UO partnered to conduct a survey of post-fire restoration program participants. In the fall of 2025 and spring of 2026, landowners who participated in the PWP program were invited to complete an online survey and a follow-up interview about their experiences with the program. The UO's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement (IPRE) developed and distributed the survey to over 200 PWP post-fire restoration program participants via postcards and emails. IPRE sourced addresses from PWP's list of participating landowners. Twenty-four landowners responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of approximately 12%. The survey contained 37 questions which were a combination of multiple choice, ranked choice, and open-ended response. The questions were organized into eight sections: introductory screening, physical restoration services received, educational support received, future services, communication, equity, final questions, and demographics. The sections were designed to assess PWP's effectiveness in delivering restoration goals in alignment with landowner needs, the efficacy and clarity of communication with PWP project managers and program staff, landowner satisfaction with program priorities and activities, and future needs for PWP services. As an incentive, survey respondents were entered into a drawing for a $25 gift card.

Of the twenty-four survey respondents, twelve completed an interview. Nine of the interviews were conducted by phone, two by video call, and one in-person. All interviews were conducted by IPRE and EWP researchers and lasted 30-45 minutes. The semi-structured interview contained a total of 30 questions organized into eight sections: personal background, program services, educational support, communication, overall satisfaction, equity, and future programming. Participants were asked specific questions and encouraged and allowed time to share additional thoughts. Interviewees received $20 gift cards as compensation to thank them for sharing their time and perspectives.

The survey and interviews addressed similar topics, allowing findings to be compared across the two methods. The survey captured participants' overall experiences with the PWP program, while the interviews provided additional context and explanation for the results reported in the survey. The interviews also identified additional needs and concerns that were not detailed in the survey. Survey and interview responses were used to identify and characterize main themes—both recurring and unique. Findings represent the experiences of the twenty-four participants who completed the survey, including the twelve who also participated in interviews. They should therefore be understood as reflecting a subset of the landowners served by the PWP program, rather than the experiences of all PWP program participants.

Findings

Twenty-four landowners completed the survey (hereafter called "survey respondents"). Twelve of those survey respondents also participated in a follow-up interview (hereafter called "interviewees"). Those who participated in either the survey and/or interview are hereafter generally called "study participants." Together, the findings of both the survey and interviews clearly indicate that study participants highly valued the PWP program's efforts and reveal the long-term challenges associated with sustaining post-fire restoration work. The results are detailed in the following sections: restoration services provided, educational support, communication, overall satisfaction and alignment with landowner goals, equity and accessibility, and priorities for future programming.

Restoration Services Provided

Pure Water Partners program participants received a variety of post-fire restoration services. The most common services study respondents reported receiving were invasive species removal and replanting with native revegetation (n = 21 and 22, respectively). Fewer survey respondents reported receiving other services, which included erosion control (n=6), free firewood (n=5), fuels reduction (n=3), and other services (n=2). PWP contractors and Northwest Youth Corps crews conducted these restoration activities on participating landowner properties.

Study participants reported that the post-fire restoration services that PWP provided aligned well with their individual restoration goals for their respective properties. Survey respondents generally found PWP's services effective, although how effective varied by service. Most survey respondents rated PWP's erosion control and fuels reduction services as *very effective* or *extremely effective* (see Figure 2). In contrast, they rated invasive vegetation management (i.e. invasive species removal) and replanting more widely, from *not at all effective* to *extremely effective* (see Figure 2).

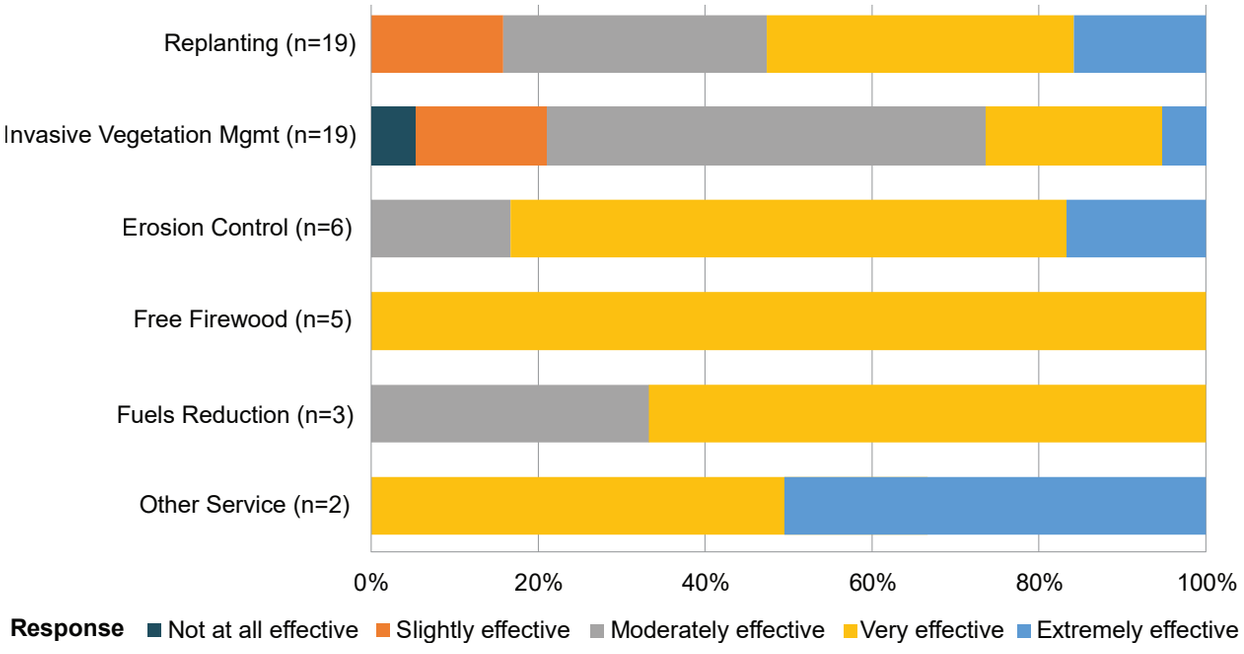

Figure 2. Landowner ratings for various restoration services' effectiveness.

The interviews helped explain the wider range of ratings reported in the survey. Erosion control, fuels reduction, and free firewood were generally discrete interventions that required little ongoing maintenance from landowners or PWP staff. As such, survey respondents mostly rated these services as *very effective* (see Figure 2). By contrast, interviewees reported that replanting and invasive species management depended on continued care and changing site conditions, which were more difficult to maintain over time. Many interviewees reported that some plantings struggled because of steep terrain, wildlife browsing, increasingly hot and dry post-fire conditions, or difficulties establishing or maintaining irrigation. Together, these findings suggest that the more mixed survey ratings for the effectiveness of revegetation and invasive-species management (see Figure 2) reflected the difficulty of sustaining ecological outcomes over time, rather than dissatisfaction with PWP's work.

Some survey participants expressed disappointment that funding ended before longer-term restoration plans could be completed. One survey respondent described general satisfaction with the revegetation services. However, they were disappointed that the longer-term restoration plan they started to develop was not finished. They stated,

"There is one section of our land where the plantings took really well, and it's a very lovely section of our property. We are very grateful [for that] and [we] just wish the seven-year plan could have been completed."

Several interviewees suggested that a voluntary cost-share option for the post-fire restoration work could help extend the reach or scope of future services. They valued the assistance provided and understood why cost-sharing was not available during the wildfire recovery phase. However, some interviewees said they would have been willing to contribute their own funds to support additional treatments, longer-term maintenance, or work beyond the limits of available program funding.

What interviewees reported needing to sustain the restoration work completed on their properties:

- Ongoing hazard tree and fuels-management assistance
- Help to identify and care for native vegetation
- Continued invasive species management
- Irrigation and early plant-establishment support
- Periodic site monitoring and progress check-ins

Additionally, a couple of interviewees indicated that the program provided additional benefits beyond post-fire restoration services and educational support—namely, emotional support and trustworthy guidance about first steps for post-fire restoration. As one interviewee described:

"Just the fact that PWP partnerships existed was a sense of hope and help after the devastation and such an awful time with the fire. We felt they had our backs when we were reeling and not knowing where to start [with recovery for the property]. Having the experts available and willing to help [with post-fire restoration] was huge and hard to quantify but really impactful."

Educational Support

Survey respondents identified multiple types of educational support, including conversations with project managers, info sheets, booklets, posters, workshops, and brochures (see Figure 3). All survey respondents found educational support to be effective, with most rating it as *moderately effective* or *very effective* (see Figure 4). A few survey respondents rated the educational support as extremely effective (Figure 4).

In response to open-ended questions, interviewees identified additional types of educational support, including site visits and management plans. Interviewees suggested that educational support was most useful when it was practical, interactive, and tailored to the conditions on their properties. They reported that site visits and walkthroughs allowed landowners to ask questions, identify plants, understand why particular restoration actions were recommended, and learn how to care for restored areas. Interviewees expressed that the most valuable printed and electronic materials were those that reinforced the direct, verbal guidance they received through site visits, workshops, and conversations. They also reported plant lists (which were one element of "info sheets," as listed in Figure 3) as especially helpful.

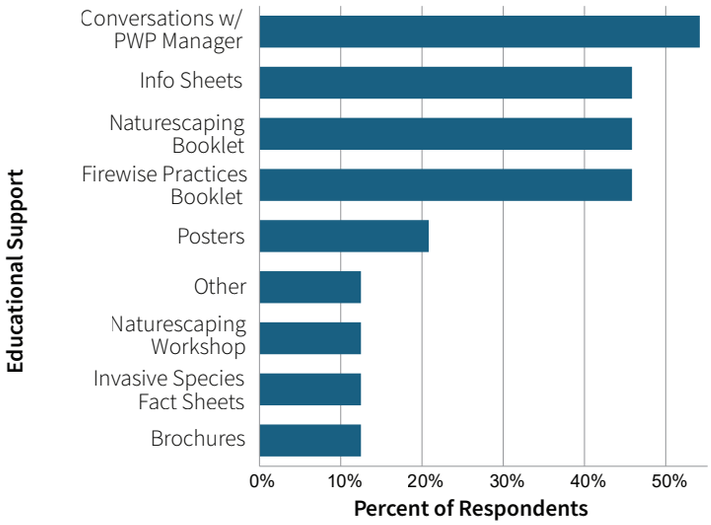

Figure 3. Types of educational support received by study participants (n=24).

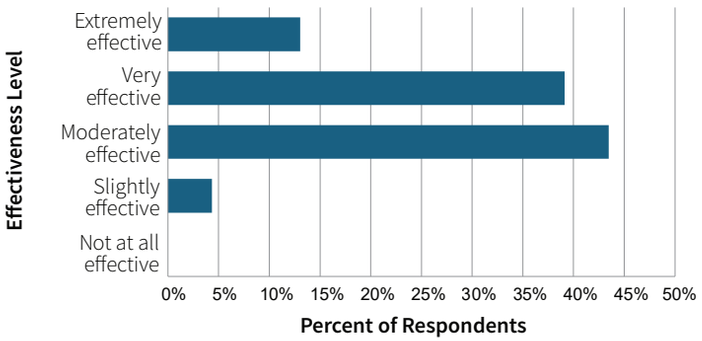

Figure 4. Effectiveness ratings for educational support (n=23).



What made education most useful?

- On-site guidance from knowledgeable staff
- Practical demonstrations and workshops
- Property-specific plant recommendations and management plans
- Follow-up handouts, guides, and electronic resources



"[Things that were especially helpful were] the fire-resistant plants handout and the natures-caping walk-through to see what plants and locations would be good. Walk-throughs and having someone on site who knows plants are very helpful."

For future programming, interviewees recommended pairing workshops, demonstrations, and property visits with concise printed or electronic resources that landowners could revisit later. This approach would allow information to be shared in an engaging, social setting that would motivate and inspire participants, while follow-up materials would help reinforce key lessons and support their continued application over time.

Participants requested additional and continuing education and technical assistance on:

- Identifying native and invasive plants
- Selecting effective invasive species removal practices
- Irrigation and early plant care
- Mulching and shrub maintenance
- Firewise and naturescaping practices
- Historical vegetation patterns and future climate conditions
- Public-land management and its relationship to private-property stewardship

"Education is always great. I've seen workshops come through recently and that seemed helpful for my neighbors. Getting out in the community with lectures and printed materials is helpful; same with online materials. The more ways to reach people with info, the better."

Communication

Communication emerged as one of PWP's clearest strengths. Survey respondents rated project managers highly for clarity (see Figure 5) and responsiveness (see Figure 6), while interviewees consistently described staff as professional, respectful, knowledgeable, timely, approachable, and helpful. Study participants generally felt well-informed through email, phone calls, text messages, and in-person interactions and were comfortable asking questions or raising concerns.

A small number of study participants identified operational concerns, including staff turnover, a missed site visit, uncertainty about the timing of deliverables, and coordination problems when adjacent properties had different project managers. These were isolated concerns within an otherwise strongly positive assessment. One interviewee suggested assigning the same project manager to neighboring properties for potential improvements to efficiency, communication, and coordination.

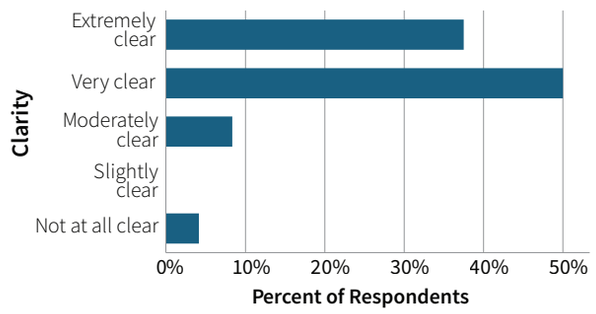

Figure 5. Landowner ratings of the clarity of PWP communication (n=24).

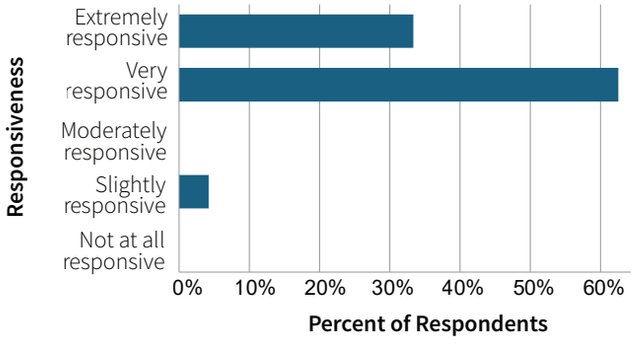

Figure 6. Landowner ratings of responsiveness of PWP staff (n=24).

"[PWP] have been great. I love the common passion [for restoration and community]."

Overall Satisfaction and Alignment with Landowner Goals

Study participants consistently reported that PWP's goals aligned with their own priorities for property recovery, watershed health, native vegetation, and invasive species management. Overall satisfaction with the PWP program was high, and study participants frequently expressed gratitude for the work completed and the relationships they developed with program staff. Additionally, participants valued PWP as a collaborative recovery partner, not merely a service provider, and some suggested emphasizing that distinction in future programming to create even more equitable and fruitful relationships between program staff and landowners.

All study participants reported that they were comfortable bringing up questions and raising concerns with PWP staff. For example, some interviewees reported that PWP program staff sometimes suggested using chemical herbicides sparingly to achieve invasive species control. For a couple of them, this was acceptable, and for others, it was not. For the interviewees who declined the use of chemical herbicides, they expressed feeling respected by PWP program staff for their decision.

"I would love to see [the PWP program] get a hundred million dollar grant to keep doing the great things they do. They are a real benefit to our community."

Equity and Accessibility of the PWP Program

Study participants generally reported few barriers in their own experiences with PWP. However, some reported that they lacked enough information about participation and resource allocation across the broader watershed to determine whether services were distributed equitably. Neutral survey responses and uncertainty expressed during interviews should not be interpreted as evidence of dissatisfaction or inequitable distribution. Rather, study participants generally felt unable to assess program reach beyond their own properties and immediate neighbors. In sum, study participants found the program accessible in their own cases but felt they could not confidently assess who may have been missed.

Interviewees suggested that some residents may be more difficult to reach because of distrust of government agencies or outside organizations, limited familiarity with restoration programs, or difficulty with written or electronic forms. Interviewee recommendations included providing optional telephone assistance, clearly explaining program goals and eligibility from the outset, framing PWP as a partner rather than a contractor, and building trust through sustained local presence and participant recommendations. They also suggested telling success stories and using landowner properties as demonstration sites in future engagement efforts.

Many interviewees suggested expanding recruitment and outreach through trusted local channels to ensure that interested landowners throughout the watershed are aware of and able to participate in PWP programming. Their recommended approaches (some of which they recognized were already in use) included door hangers, direct mail, local Facebook groups, the McKenzie River Reflections newspaper, the Blue River Community Bulletin Board, notices at the post office, meetings at local fire stations, and tabling at community events.



Priorities for Future Programming

Study participants are generally interested in having the PWP program continue offering services.

Restoration Services Landowners Would Like to Continue. Survey respondents indicated a clear ranking of the services they most want the PWP program to continue (see Figure 7). They identified invasive species management (n=17) as the most pressing need for the future, followed by replanting (n=7) and fuels reduction (n=6). Respondents also listed dead or hazard tree removal, education/workshops, and erosion control (n=2 each), no additional services needed, native plant material/discounts, ongoing/long-term maintenance, and site review/technical assistance (n=1). In terms of suggested times to offer educational workshops, the majority of survey respondents indicated that weekday afternoons in the spring were the best times.

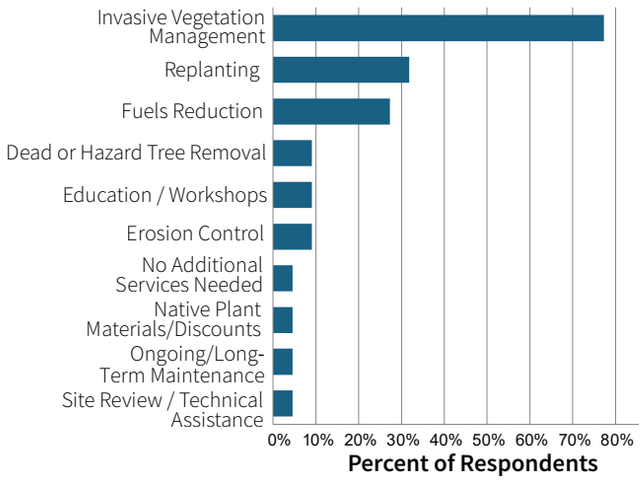

Figure 7. Restoration services landowners would like PWP to offer again (n=22; respondents could select multiple options).

New Restoration Services Landowners Would Like. Survey respondents also indicated their interest in new restoration services that PWP could provide in the future (see Figure 8). Nearly 30% suggested that PWP offer ongoing maintenance and follow-up. Other services the respondents suggested included native plant replacement/riparian plantings, new infrastructure and amenities[4], regional/inter-agency coordination, dead tree removal and land preparation, alternative removal methods including grazing or mechanical removal, native plant access and purchasing, and repeating the core services offered already.

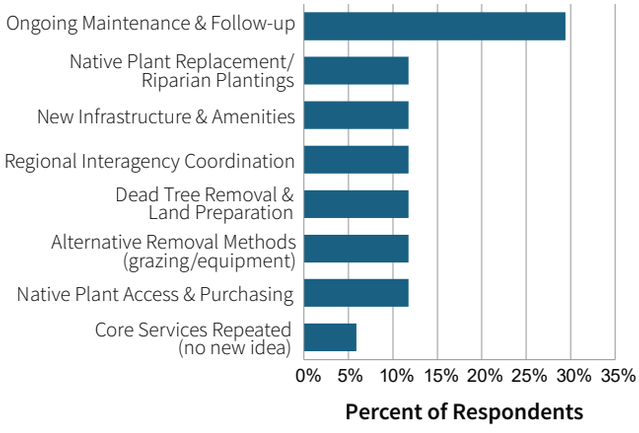

Figure 8. New services that survey respondents suggested that PWP could offer in the future (n=17).



4 "New infrastructure and amenities" includes erosion-control-related infrastructure and two participant-suggested additions: fences and paths. Fences were suggested as a service PWP could offer as a way to help landowners manage their goats used for invasive species control, while paths across properties and to the river were suggested to help guide access in ways that support river health.

The interviews reiterated and expanded on what continued or future support should look like in practice. Interviewees requested regular follow-up visits, help with the identification of native and invasive plants, guidance on plant care, irrigation support, and assistance with maintaining restoration work after initial implementation (particularly in terms of invasive species removal). Furthermore, interviewees requested additional fuels reduction, hazard tree removal, property monitoring, and continued educational opportunities. Some also supported expanding services to upland and non-riparian areas and reaching residents who recently returned or purchased property.

Nearly eight in ten (79%) survey respondents expressed interest in participating in future PWP programs, while the remaining respondents (21%) were unsure (see Figure 9). No one indicated that they did not wish to participate in future programs. Similarly, all interviewees expressed positivity toward the idea of future PWP programming. This underscores the strong demand for continued support of such programs, and points to an existing base of landowners interested in long-term watershed stewardship.

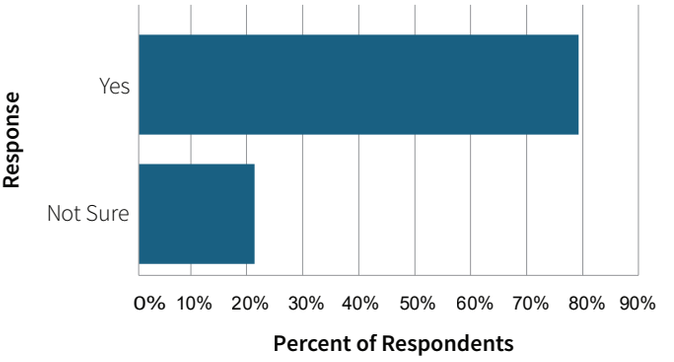

Figure 9. Landowners' desire to participate again in future PWP programming (n=24).

The combined findings of the survey and interviews suggest that study participants do not view restoration as complete when planting or initial invasive species removal ends. Instead, they see PWP's future value in helping sustain restoration over time and are eager to continue this work.



Conclusions and Recommendations

Survey respondents identified that the PWP program included generally positive provisioning of restoration services, strong communication and support, and high alignment with landowner goals. They indicated a clear demand for continued invasive species management and related restoration assistance. The interviewees confirmed and expanded upon survey respondents' points. For example, interviewees explained how the effectiveness of replanting efforts was often linked to the long-term realities of ecological recovery, including invasive regrowth, irrigation needs, and plant survival. Additionally, interviewees explained that educational support was most beneficial when it paired in-person, interactive workshops or conversations with follow-up printed or digital materials.

Across the survey and interviews, study participants described PWP as a valuable and trusted partner in post-fire recovery. Although this work only reflects 24 out of the total 200+ properties enrolled in the PWP program, it points to key takeaways that are useful for the post-program evaluation and future PWP program design. For example, the program's strongest features were its knowledgeable and responsive staff, collaborative relationships with landowners, and provision of restoration services that many study participants said they could not have completed on their own.

Evaluation findings support the need for a future program model that combines targeted restoration work with periodic monitoring, practical education, landowner follow-up, and sustained maintenance assistance. Such an approach would help preserve the benefits of past investments while supporting long-term watershed health, landowner stewardship activities, and community resilience to wildfire.

Key takeaways from study participants' evaluations of the PWP program:

- Participants highly valued PWP activities because they aligned with their goals, and they reported high overall satisfaction with the program.
- Participants rated one-time services, including erosion control, free firewood, and fuels reduction, as *very effective* or *extremely effective*.
- Ratings varied more widely for services that require ongoing care, such as invasive vegetation management and replanting. Even when participants rated these services as less effective, they remained satisfied with PWP's work and recognized that successful restoration requires long-term stewardship.
- Participants recommended that the PWP program offer continued invasive species removal, plant care, and irrigation support to improve long-term restoration outcomes.
- In addition to providing restoration services, some participants felt emotionally buoyed by the existence of the PWP program and the efforts of its staff.
- Participants received educational support in several forms. They found approaches that combined verbal or interactive learning with written follow-up materials most beneficial.

- Participants generally described communication with PWP staff as clear and responsive.
- Participants found the program accessible and equitable based on their own experiences, although they could not confidently assess whether it had missed or underserved others.
- Participants expressed interest in future programming and identified continued invasive species management and replanting as the highest priorities.

Recommendations for future PWP programming focused on sustained stewardship:

1. **Continue priority services.** Maintain and expand invasive species management, hazard tree removal, fuels reduction, native planting, and restoration in riparian, upland, and non-riparian areas.
2. **Provide ongoing follow-up.** Offer periodic site visits, monitoring, and progress reports to help landowners track plant survival, address invasive regrowth, and stay engaged in long-term maintenance.
3. **Strengthen irrigation and plant-care support.** Provide practical guidance on watering, mulching, shrub care, and early plant establishment to improve survival rates. Help landowners address issues with irrigation.
4. **Pair education with hands-on assistance.** Continue workshops, demonstrations, site visits, and consultations, supported by concise printed and electronic materials that landowners can revisit later.
5. **Improve continuity and coordination.** Reduce the effects of staff turnover through clearer handoffs and communication and assign the same manager to neighboring properties when possible.
6. **Pursue sustained funding.** Seek long-term funding, partnerships, and possible cost-share approaches that reflect the multi-year nature of restoration and maintenance.
7. **Expand outreach and accessibility.** Use multiple trusted local channels, clearly explain program priorities and eligibility, provide phone-based help with forms, and reach new and recently returning residents.
8. **Build trust and share results.** Continue framing PWP as a collaborative partner, use demonstration sites and success stories, and communicate restoration progress to landowners, funders, and the wider community.

Overall, these recommendations point toward a sustained stewardship model that combines targeted restoration with maintenance, monitoring, education, and long-term landowner relationships.



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