

A CREEK RUNS FREE AGAIN

A couple remove a dam from Owens Creek on their land west of Junction City

By SUSAN PALMER
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HIGH PASS ROAD — Hydrologists call them LDDs — little dinky dams — and they're not much of a deal in the realm of waterworks.

The dam partially blocking the flow of Owens Creek on David Turner and Suzanne Linquist's 17-acre property west of Junction City was just a couple of measly front-end loader buckets dropped into the narrow channel.

That's nothing compared with, say, Fern Ridge Dam, a milelong 44-foot-high structure that can hold back 9,000 acre-feet of water.

The Owens Creek number was put in by a previous homeowner who had a hankering for ornamental ponds on the property 25 to 30 years ago.

But the dam impeded the movement of resident cutthroat trout, slowed and warmed the water and held back silt, which left it murky.

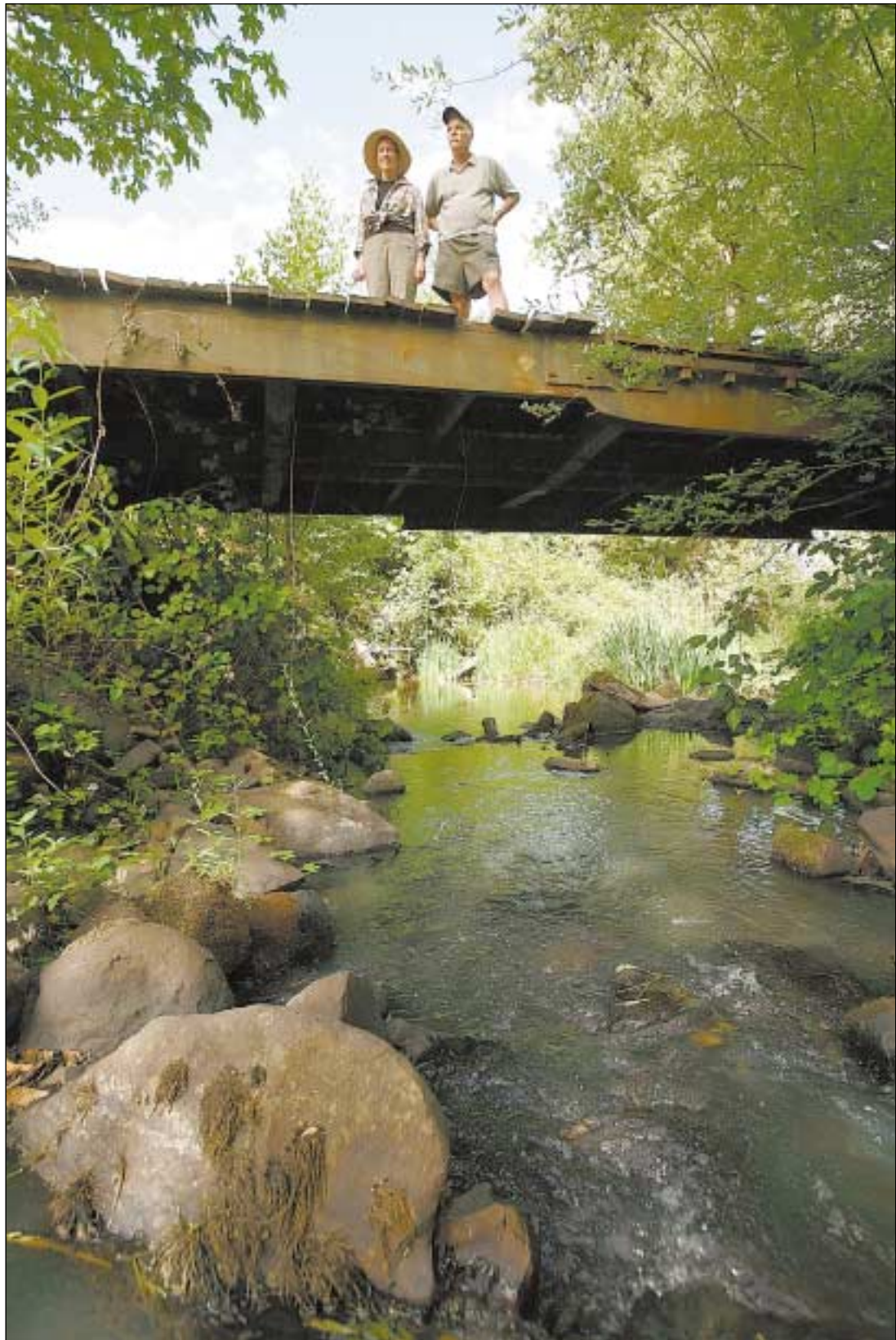
So last year, Turner and Linquist — with help from the Long Tom Watershed Council — ripped their dam out to let the creek flow more naturally into Bear Creek and then on down to the Long Tom River.

On Monday, they invited neighbors and scientists to have a look at the results — faster moving water, less silt and cooler temperatures, which all adds up to improved habitat for fish.

It wasn't an easy decision for the couple, who bought the property 4½ years ago, in part because of the ponds, which attracted great blue heron, beaver and wood ducks.

But after getting involved with the Long Tom Watershed Council, they began having their doubts about the dam. The council, a non-profit agency devoted to improving water quality in the 410 square miles that make up the watershed, works closely with such landowners, council coordinator Dana Erickson said.

"People want to do it themselves, but they need to be connected to the



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Please turn to **DAM**, Page A5

Suzanne Linquist and David Turner view the results of removing a dam from Owens Creek.

science and the funding. ... Somewhere like this, the landowners are never going to move a dam by themselves," she said.

Watershed projects and monitoring coordinator Cindy Thieman worked with the couple, lining up a grant to pay for the project and helping them with tree-planting and invasive species removal projects. On hand for the tour, she described the challenge of sandbagging the creek and rerouting the water through a couple of tubes while a welder and backhoe operator dismantled and removed the dam.

The dozen or so neighbors who came by also were treated to a couple of interesting lectures from visiting scientists.

U.S. Forest Service hydrologist Gordon Grant assured the group that such small dam removals have few downsides.

"There are misconceptions that taking a dam out increases flood propensity, but that's not true," he said.

He described future big dam removal projects - Marmot Dam on the Sandy River will be taken out this year to improve fish passage on the river east of Portland, and the Savage Rapids Dam on the Rogue River is slated for removal by 2009.

The scale of those projects dwarfs the Owens Creek effort. Taking out the small dam liberated about 500 cubic yards - 50 dump truck loads - of silt, Grant said. By comparison, when the Marmot Dam comes out, it will release a million cubic yards.

Oregon State University invasive species expert Sam Chan described the challenges landowners face keeping out plants such as reed canary grass, purple loosestrife and milfoil, which escaped from urban fish aquariums to invade area waterways.

With the ponds newly empty and fresh soil exposed, such plants can easily take over, Chan said. Fighting them with herbicides can be tricky near a waterway. Sometimes the inert ingredients in the product are more toxic to fish than the chemical that kills the plant, Chan said. Turner and Linquist have been using black tarps to smother the weeds.

The couple have had help from volunteers in planting 98 trees since the dam came out to improve shading along the creek. The tiny saplings are surrounded by stout wire cages to keep the beaver out. They miss the ducks, but the great blue herons haven't abandoned them. And now, they get to enjoy the babbling sound of the creek, Turner said. Better still are the fish.

"I've thrown my fly rod in the creek, and every time I do I catch a nice little cutthroat," he said.

Upstream neighbor Debra Johnson - who stopped by for the tour - is pleased with the project. The dam had changed the stream on her property, creating ponds where there once had been rapids and a waterfall. "I've been hoping for this for years," she said.