

SAGEBRUSH AND HIP BOOTS

There is enough going on in the world to be cynical about these days. Pandemics, global warming, terrorism and the like. Sometimes it's difficult to find something positive to help one maintain an optimistic viewpoint. One such "feel good" story comes out of Plumas County, a county that is large in size (over 1 million acres), but small in population (about 20,000), located in northeastern California. Nothing much remarkable there, but Plumas County happens to be the headwaters of the storied Feather River, whose three main branches provide about 60% of California's water supply. This story concerns a man named James (Jim) Wilcox, Jr., and our interest in Jim begins in April, 1990...

Jim started as a project manager for stream and meadow restoration projects in the Feather River headwaters on April 1, 1990, working for Plumas Corporation, a non-profit organization that served as one of many partners in the Feather River Coordinated Resource Management (FR-CRM), a partnership of state, federal, local and private entities. Jim's knowledge of geomorphology (the science of land change over time), his passion for the environment, and his on-the-ground working experience in meadow and stream restoration became Plumas Corporation's major contribution to a 28-year-long partnership with the FR-CRM, which implemented a total of 72 on-the-ground watershed restoration projects during that span. Of these, Jim personally designed and/or built 48 projects, successfully restoring 55 miles of stream channel and 4,332 acres of associated riparian areas in a wide variety of channel types and settings.

In 1995, Jim was the first to utilize the "pond and plug" technique to implement meadow restoration in California. Since that time, Plumas Corporation has built 21 meadow projects, restoring over 2,700 acres of meadow floodplain and wetland habitat in the upper Feather River Watershed alone. The work has not gone unnoticed in other regions; Jim's expertise and advice is continually requested (and given) for restoration projects throughout the Sierras, expanding restoration knowledge and capacity in many watershed groups, agency staff, and private individuals in the Sierras, southern Cascades, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, and even in the Middle East, at the request of the Jordanian government in 2015. Since 2007, Jim has designed and implemented seven restoration projects for partner/clients outside of the Feather River Basin, primarily on the Eldorado and Sequoia National Forests, along with one project on private lands managed by the Sierra Foothill Conservancy. These projects have restored an additional six miles of stream channel and 168 acres of meadow and riparian habitats in California.

In 2009, Jim was asked to help the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation develop a grant program business plan for Sierra Nevada Meadow Restoration under their keystone initiatives for fish, wildlife, and habitat conservation. The long-term goal of the Foundation's initiative was to utilize and expand upon the types of restoration projects that Plumas Corporation and the FR-CRM had been implementing for the past several years to help restore in-ground water storage capacity in the Sierras by more than 500,000 acre-feet. This was water that had been lost to incised stream beds and desertification of once-grassy meadows that has been ongoing since the 1850s. Jim has helped many funding agencies and partners recognize that these restoration projects not only benefit the people of California by increasing in-ground water storage at significantly less costs than building new dams for surface storage, but that re-watered meadows contribute valuable wildlife habitat benefits and a myriad of other perks to the ecosystem that massive dam projects cannot compete with. Efforts such as these ultimately led

to the formation of the Sierra Meadows Partnership in 2014 and the development of the Sierra Meadows Strategy, a watershed document that guides Sierra meadow restoration to this day, compiled by a variety of partners - including Jim.

Ryan Burnett, Director of the Sierra Nevada Group of Point Blue Conservation Science, a lead partner of the Sierra Meadows Partnership, reflects on his experiences working with Jim, "I met Jim in 2009, when I met with Plumas Corp to discuss how Point Blue might start monitoring meadow restoration projects effects on birds. Jim was immediately supportive and wanted our help to provide more data to help guide restoration projects. Not all practitioners/managers feel that way. Jim doesn't get enough credit for fostering research and monitoring of the projects he has implemented. But, I really gained appreciation for Jim by spending time with him in the field. I had been conducting ecological studies of meadows for 10 years when I first walked into a meadow with Jim...he blew me away with his ability to "read a meadow". He opened my eyes to things I had never noticed and has greatly increased my knowledge of meadow systems. He has been a great partner, humoring my crazy ideas even agreeing to change some restoration designs based on my feedback, and always supportive of monitoring and research to further our understanding of meadow restoration. [He is] A true pioneer in Sierra meadow restoration. Congrats on 30 incredibly productive years!"

In 2010, Jim was selected from a nationwide field of candidates for the National Wetlands Award from the Environmental Law Institute (ELI) for his innovative techniques and willingness to go the extra mile for meadow and river restoration. Longtime Forest Service hydrologist in the Lake Tahoe Basin, Craig Oehrli, sums up Jim's 30-year legacy, "I would say that Jim is one of those individuals who helped put Sierra Nevada Meadows, and their importance, in the consciousness of the public. He has helped us all think about new ways to heal and manage this critical environment. He has not lost passion for his work, which is a reminder that we need to be in this restoration/management effort for the long haul. As our group evolves and science moves forward with new ideas challenging established norms, let us not forget those who brought us to the point. Thank you Jim and congratulations!! You earned it."

In 2014, the Plumas Corporation Board of Directors promoted Jim to the position of Executive Director. In this capacity, Jim not only oversees the watershed program staff and program of work, while maintaining his role as project manager (and equipment operator) during the busy days of field work in the Summer and Fall, but also oversees the Plumas County Fire Safe Council staff and their program of work. Since Jim took the helm of Plumas Corporation, the organization's staff has doubled from six to twelve, and the watershed program has expanded across the Sierra to include a long-term, robust monitoring program for meadow hydrology and carbon sequestration, as well as tracking implemented meadow projects' response to restoration.

Plumas Corporation is also developing a forest restoration strategy and program while supporting the continued growth of Plumas County's Fire Safe program. The Fire Safe Council's Coordinator (and Plumas Corporation employee) Hannah Hepner focuses on forest management for fuel reduction and wildfire resiliency. Of Jim, she says, "His hands-on background working in the woods gives him a breadth of understanding of fuels and wildfire, and the effect of past management and climate change on both. He views watersheds in terms of the whole and comprehends the value of forest management on stream and meadow restoration/conservation, carbon sequestration, and downstream benefits. Jim takes the time to share his knowledge and, with his mentorship, I have learned more than I could have expected in my time with the Fire Safe Council. As an Executive Director, Jim seems to have an intrinsic

understanding of gender equality and the true meaning of human resources. Every employee's strengths are valued and cultivated. As well, our opportunities for growth are known. He provides guidance and support while offering autonomy – which is just the right mix to allow me to make and learn from my mistakes!"

Plumas Corporation staff, old and new, have nothing but positive things to say about Jim's leadership and professional knowledge. Leslie Mink, a 22-year veteran Project Manager with Plumas Corporation whom Jim mentored says, "Jim's been inspiring me to try and keep all the spaghetti on the plate, and it's always been a big, very interesting, spicy serving, on a little plate. Fortunately, I love spaghetti." Dana Flett, a new addition to the team in 2019 states, "On my first day in the field with Jim he said, "Make sure you aren't moving so fast that you miss what the land is trying to tell you." I was struck by his deep sense of humility and deference to natural processes. This attitude permeates Jim's management of the land and influences his leadership strategy over the strong team here at Plumas Corp. He has a unique ability to utilize both natural features and human partners in order to best showcase their strengths. Jim is, without doubt, the most effective mentor I have worked for and I look forward to the many lessons I am sure to continue to learn under his tutelage." Jim's approach to restoration and management of Plumas Corporation is exemplified in the sentiments shared by long-time meadow restoration partner and friend, Todd Sloat, "I've had the pleasure working with Jim and other Plumas Corporation staff for over fifteen years. I will be eternally grateful for his willingness to mentor me in the wetland restoration field. I think of Jim as extremely knowledgeable, patient, giving, and loyal. I've found that his leadership and generosity is duplicated by all staff, and I always feel fortunate when given the chance to work together."

So that's Jim's story, and not so coincidentally, the story of Plumas Corporation and their efforts to bring water back to the dry, sage-covered flats of the upper Feather River watershed. Oh, and the "Sagebrush and Hip Boots?" Well, sage brush is what Jim encounters when he first enters a project site, and hip boots are what he needs when the job is done. Congratulations on 30 years of restoring meadows, Jim. You have earned it, indeed.