



COPPER RIVER WATERSHED PROJECT

COPPER RIVER
Runner
FALL 2022

WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS

BY KATE MORSE, *Program Director*

To say it's been a wet, rainy fall is an understatement. In Cordova we received over 50 inches of rain in Aug-Sept. Communities in the Copper Basin also faced season highs for precipitation, and creeks and rivers continue to flow deep and swift. In addition to people's moods, our local infrastructure has also been feeling the weather.

Sinkholes appeared at sites along the Copper River highway, and scour holes grew larger as water chugged under highways in the Copper Basin. Undersized culverts were the culprit, constricting the flow of heavy rains as they gushed from high mountain passes to the ocean. While the immediate fix will be a quick band-aid, the long-term solution isn't far off.

For the sites on the Copper River delta where sinkholes formed, CRWP has been working with partners since 2017, funded by Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council, to address the highest priority crossings. Two culverts that recently caused sinkholes luckily have final designs for new, larger culverts, designed to convey greater volumes of water, and minimize the impact to juvenile and adult fish migrations on the productive Copper River delta. While there will be short-term fixes to maintain access and safety for drivers, our efforts to improve fish passage will also result in more resilient infrastructure, better suited to convey increased precipitation, which unfortunately climate models indicate is in our future. Need proof? There was no damage to the roadways or the larger culverts that our partnership recently replaced during the same high rain events.



Sinkholes on the Copper River Highway were caused by high flows being constricted by small culverts, forcing water through the road bed and causing material around the culverts to erode.

Excessive rain and flooding events have proven to be destructive across the watershed. In 2006, flood waters in the Little Tonsina River washed out the undersized culverts from under the Burma Pit Road, a gravel road off of the Richardson Highway that accesses the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, a riprap material site, as well as private properties. The emergency temporary culverts put back in after the flood managed to stay in place for over a decade, with two 11-foot pipes conveying the 43-foot wide Little Tonsina River, not ideal for fish passage.

Unfortunately, because this site was on a low-priority road and needed an expensive fix (a bridge was the best alternative), the temporary fix remained in place. As a result of our efforts to prioritize fish habitat restoration across the watershed, we knew that this site

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Girders for the new bridge are lowered into place and will make it easier for aquatic organisms, including Coho and Chinook Salmon, to move up and downstream. Photo courtesy of ADOT.

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had the highest value to fisheries in the entire region, with over 70 miles of estimated King and Coho Salmon spawning and rearing habitat upstream. In 2017, CRWP initiated fundraising efforts to help make the permanent fix a reality, and this year we officially broke ground on a new bridge.

The federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) included significant funding for fish passage and infrastructure improvements. Our partners at U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and BLM were quick to allocate resources their agencies received from the BIL to help make the Little Tonsina Project a reality, closing the final gap and adding to the other generous support from NOAA, Denali Commission, and the Alaska Sustainable Salmon Fund. In fact, it was the first USFWS-funded BIL project to break ground, garnering national attention.

We would not be in this position of having dirt-turning restoration projects ready to go, that benefit both the fisheries and the roadways of the Copper River watershed, were it not for the early investment from our membership. Individual gifts that are not restricted by grant guidelines allow CRWP to connect with partners, develop new concepts, and innovate for the benefit of the long-term health of the Copper River watershed and its inhabitants. Therefore, these successes are to be celebrated by the members and partners of the Copper River Watershed Project. Thank you.

We continue to work with partners to maximize our early planning investments to attract additional BIL funding to the Copper River watershed, and let's hope this funding is like our weather—when it rains, it pours!

LETTER FROM CRWP DIRECTOR

To all our Copper River friends,

It's been a packed and productive 2022 here at the Copper River Watershed Project (CRWP).

We have:

- Broken ground on our largest construction project to date - the Little Tonsina bridge
- Hosted several in-person events, including a film festival and Wild Food Feast
- Engaged volunteers and partners in large-scale cleanups and recycling efforts

It's hard to convey the full spectrum of work that the CRWP team, volunteers, partners and members are collectively achieving. But much like our tangible bridge stretched across the Little Tonsina River, I am in awe of the strength of the connections being built by this organization.

What you will see in this newsletter is the power of people working in collaboration and the power of building strong relationships; our invisible bridges. The strength of people banding together for a collective good for the Copper River is more powerful and more impactful than anything that may be dividing us. Finding common ground in support of wild spaces, healthy watersheds, and the resources supported by that, will continue to be a driving force in the future of our beloved watershed.

If you are a volunteer, donor, and/or partner of the Copper River Watershed Project, your contribution to our organization and to the region is significant and valuable. So, thank you for being a part of building our 'bridges'; connecting each of us.

Sincerely



Lisa Docken



Celebrating our 2022 Watershed Hero Dave Cruz and the Kotsina cleanup in 2020 and 2022 at the Wild Food Feast in Kenny Lake, Alaska. With critical support from donors, volunteers and partners coordinated by the CRWP, this cleanup event was a huge success (see page 4 for the story). Left to right; Matt Piche; CRWP Board Chair, Lisa Docken; Executive Director, Tenley Nelson; Board Member, Dave Cruz, CEO of Cruz Construction, Inc., Sunshine Meitzner, Board Member, Lishaw Lincoln; Board Secretary, Caitlin McKinstry; Board Treasurer.

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CLASSROOM CURRENTS

INSPIRING STEWARDSHIP IN COPPER RIVER TEENS

BY MADDY HAMBY, 10TH GRADER, GLENNALLEN HIGH SCHOOL

What does it mean to be a steward of the Copper River watershed? Being a steward means you are learning about the environment then doing what you can to help. The Copper River Watership Project along with BLM, WISE, Prince William Sound Science Center, and Wrangell St. Elias National Park offers a program called the Copper River Stewardship Program every year to teach kids to become stewards of their community and the Copper River. In June 2022, 13 stewards came together from Glennallen, Gakona, Copper Center, Kenny Lake, Cordova, and McCarthy for a trip that started in the Copper Valley and ended in Cordova.

This year the focus of the trip was invasive species. We learned about invasive plants, where they come from, how they can travel, and what they can do to the ecosystem that they've taken root in. Here in the Copper Basin, we learned about White Sweetclover (WSC). WSC is an invasive plant which takes root in disrupted areas like along roads right-of-ways, including along the Trans-Alaska pipeline. WSC is spread around by trucks and other forms of transportation along those disrupted areas.

Invasive species can greatly hurt the ecosystem where they have made their new home. One thing they can do is take away the natural resources that the native plants and animals need to survive. It is important to be aware of these invasive species so we can protect our natural ecosystems. When we found invasive species, we did what we could to eradicate them, including pulling plants, popping seed heads, and disposing of them properly.

The Stewardship Program is a great opportunity for any teenager who likes being outdoors. You sleep in tents, float on rivers, and go on hikes. Not only the activities you participate in, but also where you go is fun and interesting. Even though each year the itinerary involves different experiences and destinations along their way, we had great views from Willow Mountain, the Copper and Gulkana Rivers, and on top of Thompson Pass. As a steward who went on this trip this year, I learned so much and had so many great experiences. Being on the sailboat from Valdez to Cordova was my favorite experience. Being out on the water and having such great weather was something I won't forget easily. I would recommend that anyone who is a freshman through seniors participate in this program and take the opportunity. You learn a lot, have great experiences, and meet new people.

Additional 2022 program support provided by Alyeska Pipeline Service Company and Prince William Sound Regional Citizens Advisory Council.



(Above) Stewards created fun comics to illustrate the impacts of invasive species. (Below) Teens helped to monitor for invasive green crabs while in Cordova.



CLEAN STREAMS FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE

LISA DOCKEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



(Right to left) Trash coming off the Kotsina delta. Photo by: Dave Cruz

Jolene Nashlund, interim Director of WISE and her family, Miles, Persephone, Willow, and Joe cleaning up at the Chitina Fishing Grounds.

Car parts, styrofoam, metal debris from old fish wheels and trailers, guy wire and concrete blocks; these are all items found in the water and along the banks of the Kotsina and Copper River near popular fishing spots in the heart of the Copper River watershed. After years of accumulation, items being lost to a changing river and the challenge of accessing these areas to remove debris, the Kotsina delta fishing sites were known to have collected some interesting trash.

In 2020, thanks to Dave Cruz and Cruz Construction, we removed a great deal of this trash from the area; see the 2021 Spring newsletter for the complete story. Dave Cruz and our partners were

back again this year and ready to rally to finish removing some of the remaining large items that became visible from the changing river system. When it comes to measuring impact, these two cleanups are quite an achievement. Close to 100 cubic yards of material, some of which is/was hazardous was removed from this culturally and biologically important region of the watershed. Dave Cruz operated heavy equipment, his volunteers did some heavy lifting and our community and partners backed them up with boots-on-the-ground hauling of smaller trash items over several days. Though picking up some interesting unmentionable trash items and getting them hauled away does not feel very glorious, the end result is a positive impact

that goes beyond the measure of trash removed. It demonstrates we can all make a lasting positive difference to our home, the places we visit and the areas we get to enjoy by making the decision to 'leave it better than the way we found it'.

Thank you to all that helped with driving trucks, picking up trash, donating their hard earned dollars and being a part of these great conversations. *The clean-up event was hosted by CRWP in partnership with Ahtna, Inc., Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission, Chitina Corporation, Chitina Traditional Indian Village Council, Chitina Dipnetter's Association, Cruz Construction, and WISE, and took place on August 12-13, 2022.*

RAFTING THE TAZLINA RIVER *in search of* INVASIVE WHITE SWEETCLOVER



BY ASHLEY TAYLOR, WATERSHED RESTORATION & GIS STAFF

In June CRWP staff joined the YETI program, a youth employment training initiative (YETI) of the Copper River Native Association for a fun-filled two days of learning about and managing invasive plants in the Copper River basin. The primary invasives of concern in the region are white sweetclover (*Melilotus alba*) and bird vetch (*Vicia cracca*) which can easily spread through human vectors. As a group we spent one morning at the Gulkana River bridge

access site and removed 30 garbage bags full of white sweetclover from a highly trafficked river access area! The next day we hit the river to search more remote gravel bars for signs of this invasive plant spreading downstream. We rafted down the Tazlina and into the mighty Copper River stopping along the way to check for white sweetclover along the banks. We found one small plant and removed it. YETI participant, Keshaw McConkey, said it best: "Rafting to put simply, was fun and enjoyable...It was a good day and unique experience for some." Thank you to Salmon Grove Charters for a great day on the water!

(Left) Peace signs, smiles, and waves from one of the rafts floating down the Tazlina River.

(Below) Hard work pays off! The YETI, CRNA, and CRWP group pose with bags full of white sweetclover.



EXPANDING PROGRAM IMPACT THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

KATE MORSE, PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Partnerships are the foundation of all of our work, and we are excited to keep growing our connections with Prince William Sound College (PWSC). During the summers of 2021-2022, we participated in three of their teacher professional development courses aimed at providing participants with the confidence, skills, and tools to involve their students in outdoor, hands-on education opportunities. As you might expect, I didn't hesitate to put all the teachers into chest waders and immerse them in aquatic explorations on the Copper River Delta.

By partnering with PWSC, we are able to share the importance of intact watersheds and aquatic ecosystems with teachers who can then share it with their students, expanding the reach of our watershed education efforts, without the work of having to plan, recruit, and implement the overall program. In the words of two-year teacher participant Cat Walker from Anchorage,

"My experiences as a teacher learning from CRWP scientists over the past two years in Cordova have been some of the best professional development in my career. Traveling to Cordova to perform hands-on, immersive scientific research ignited a passion for environmental conservation that enhances my teaching practices. I loved identifying wetland invertebrates and fish in the field and have replicated the experience for my students at our local pond."

We have continued to work with PWSC programs, including college-aged students in their natural resource technician classes, plugging in content on fish passage restoration and GIS in hopes of inspiring future water resource professionals with the necessary skills and a passion for intact watersheds!

Teachers were literally immersed in explorations on the Delta in an effort to inspire them to engage their students in similar ways.
Photo courtesy of Cat Walker.



MICHELLE
MCAFFEE

Communications Specialist

Hello! I started working with the Copper River Watershed Project in August.

I am delighted to be part of the excellent work CRWP is doing to keep the Copper River watershed clean and healthy. Eleven years ago, I fell in love with the Copper River and McCarthy, where I spent most of my summers and experienced glacially-fed rivers for the first time. The Copper Basin's mountains, glaciers, people, and rivers captured my heart in a way no other place has ever done. Getting to know the McCarthy community and tagging along on backcountry and fishing trips opened my eyes to the greater Copper River watershed, its magnificence and the importance of doing all we can to keep it intact.

I came aboard as the Communications Specialist, helping with social media, newsletters, emails, and website updates. Working remotely from Southern Oregon, where I am based, allows me to stay more deeply connected to this rare Copper River watershed and play a small part in its stewardship through the work CRWP is doing. I am also a writer and photographer, and I love hiking, camping, and gardening.





Vetworks Intern Amanda, City Refuse staff Enrico, and Stewardship Intern, Floyd (right), standing next to freshly baled nets ready for recycling.

CELEBRATING OUR NET RECYCLING HEROS

BY SHAE BOWMAN, OPERATIONS MANAGER

It's no secret that the success of any recycling program depends upon the often unappreciated investment of time by those wanting to recycle. Fishing web recycling is no different. CRWP is excited to celebrate some of the local heros who have helped make our net recycling efforts so successful. We are on track to send out another full 40-ft container of baled seine and gill net web at the end of October to our partner, Net Your Problem, who will sell our nets to companies who make products like Econyl. Econyl turns nets and carpets into nylon fiber which can be used to make active-wear clothing, running shoes, and swimwear.

In the life of a fishing net, there are many hands who handle the net, and we are pleased to celebrate efforts to help recycle the net at every step along the way. There are individuals within businesses that sell web, the net hangers and menders, and local fishermen who all have stepped up and invested the extra time to deliver ready-to-recycle net. Special thanks to Jacob Hand and the seine building crew, Cordova Net Supply, and LFS. This dedication allows us to load the web directly into the baler with very minimal clean-up.

The impact of this involvement from local businesses and fishermen means we can move significantly more nets through the recycling program more efficiently! For the net that is not delivered clean,

there are the amazing volunteers who show up to almost every recycling event to help clean-up the web so it's ready to be recycled.

The City of Cordova Refuse Department has also been a significant contributor to the recycling program by helping us bale and load nets. The City also collects and bales aluminum cans which have value when recycled, and funds raised from aluminum recycling are then donated to CRWP for re-investing into the net-recycling program. Taking time to recycle your aluminum cans is a great way to support fishing web recycling in Cordova!

This summer our recycling efforts were also bolstered by our first-ever Stewardship Intern, Floyd Witsoe, a junior at Cordova High School. Floyd was eager to jump in wherever needed and lend a helping hand, including plucking invasive plants like Orange Hawkweed and helping out with Salmon Jam. However, the majority of Floyd's time was spent helping with the Fishing Web Recycling Program.

Over the course of the internship, Floyd helped to make 9 bales of fishing web this summer, which amounts to moving approximately 7,200 lbs of material three times - once to store material in the conex, once to load the material into the bobcat for transport to the baler, and once to load the material into the baler. Moving all this material takes many hands and we were so grateful to have had Floyd around for the summer to make the job that much easier!

Finally, there are the partners who help to fund our efforts to recycle nets, including Copper River/Prince William Sound Marketing Association, Cordova Community Foundation, The Eyak Corporation, and Cordova Electric Cooperative. CRWP is honored to work with an outstanding team to keep fishing nets out of our landfills and to help make the Copper River commercial fishery more sustainable. With the support of this team, we recycled 16,000 lbs of nets and aluminum cans last year. Stay tuned to hear the total poundage of material that was recycled at the end of this season.



Mike Maxwell, one of our net recycling heroes from LFS, shows off a flatbed full of gillnet web ready for recycling.

ROAD TRIP!

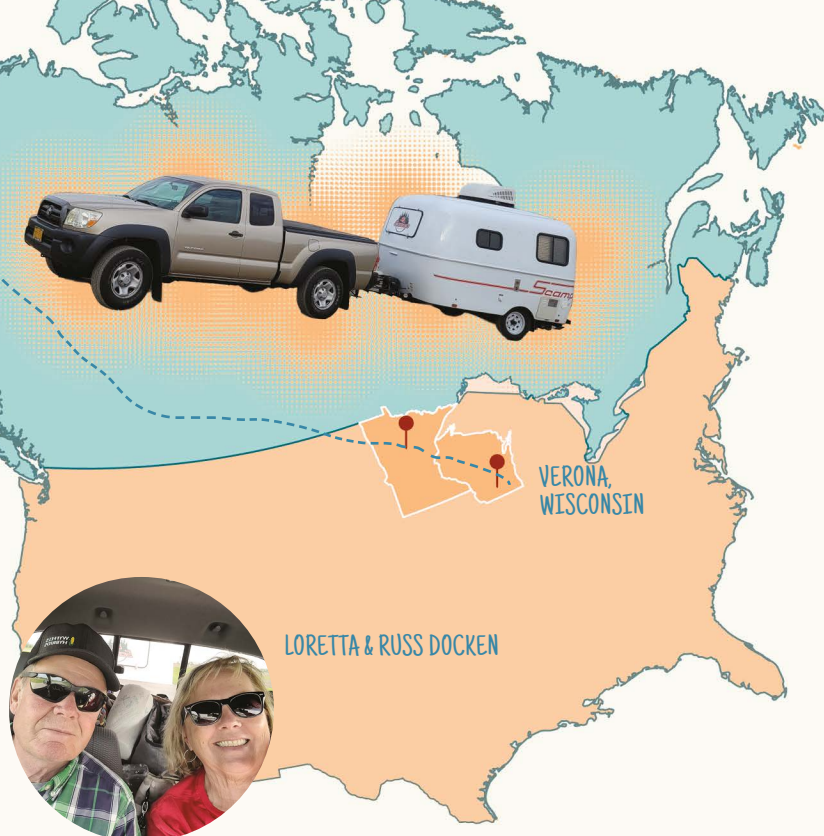
BY LISA DOCKEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

This summer CRWP supporters (who also happen to be my in-laws) made the adventurous road trip from Verona, Wisconsin to Cordova, Alaska to deliver our CRWP pickup truck and new Scamp sleeper camper. In true Docken style, Loretta and Russ Docken did not shy away from a little adventure.

These days, it can be challenging to find used vehicles for a decent price and many companies have over 12-18 month long wait lists for small campers. Finding vehicles that were the best fit for CRWP meant looking outside of Alaska and across the entire country. Thankfully when we did find a truck and a camper...many, many miles away, the Dockens graciously offered to drive them to Cordova.

Hitting the road, the Dockens kept me in the loop with text messages of their progress and where they were spending the night. Crossing the border into Canada, finding the camper drop off location, and getting on the ferry, were all seamless events as these two avid road trippers knew what they were doing. While in Canada, I was also given reports of the classic Canadian table fare sampling like poutine and Molson Canadian. For those that may not know what poutine is, it's a late night comfort food of french fries topped with cheese curds and smothered in hot gravy (it's delicious). After 10 hours driving in a day, I was glad to see smiling faces and celebratory treats.

Taking in the Alaskan landscape. Photo by: Loretta Docken



Not only did the Dockens drive 3,500 miles for us, they also stocked the trailer with the cooking and camping supplies we would need; adding in goodies like s'mores supplies (an essential morale booster during peak mosquito season).

The night the truck arrived by ferry to Cordova, CRWP staff loaded it back up to head right into the field the next morning, visiting fish crossings and meeting with stakeholders. Traveling to project locations to meet and conduct site assessments with partners, youth groups, and community members is a key part of the work we do. Having safe and reliable vehicles allows us to spend more time on site and in the field with partners.

As we open up to more in-person events, meeting supporters and feeling safe to gather and celebrate the Copper River, I'm so proud and grateful to get better acquainted with CRWP supporters. In all the ways that our members and partners lift up the region, support salmon and support a healthy watershed through donation, in-kind support and volunteering, know that all those ways make a difference. Thank you Loretta and Russ. Making the long journey to Alaska to bring us equipment that then helps us improve our work means a lasting difference in this region. If you see the pickup truck (named Copper) and our (Marshmallow) Scamp camper, don't be shy and come and see us!

Thanks to Daniel Schmalzer for his investigative work sourcing our new equipment!



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WHY SUPPORT CRWP?

I got involved with the Copper River Watershed Project (CRWP) in the Summer of 2020 when I approached Wrangell Institute for Science & Environment (WISE), with an offer to clean up the debris (abandoned campers, fish wheel parts & pieces) that had collected over many years on the Kotsina delta. WISE facilitated a meeting with Lisa Docken of CRWP. Lisa engaged Ahtna Inc., Chitina Native Corporation, Chitina Traditional Village Council and other interested parties in organizing the cleanup effort.

I personally believe that it is our responsibility to protect and cherish the Copper River salmon fishery that many folks in Alaska feed their families from. It is our responsibility as a user group

to keep our area clean and safe and our fish healthy. That's why I wholeheartedly support the efforts of CRWP. In working with the CRWP on solutions to improve the Copper River Fishery at Chitina, I have found their Management and Board of Directors to not only talk-the-talk but to also roll up their sleeves and walk-the-walk to help cleanup this area so future generations of Alaskans can have healthy wild salmon for a food source.

The CRWP slogan is "Up River & Down, Salmon are Common Ground." There are no truer words. Please join the CRWP.

– Dave Cruz

