



RVCC
Rural Voices for
Conservation
COALITION

**TETON CREEK
CORRIDOR**
A CASE STUDY

JULY 2021

About RVCC

RVCC envisions healthy landscapes and vibrant rural communities throughout the American West. We are committed to finding and promoting solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities. By bringing rural leaders together to share their work, we serve as a vital peer learning and capacity building network that accelerates the practice of land stewardship and aligned economic development. To learn more about our work, visit:

www.ruralvoicescoalition.org

Nondiscrimination Statement

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at [How to File a Program Discrimination Complaint](#) and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

Teton Creek Corridor

About This Case Study

Land management approaches that cross ownerships and engage multiple partners are essential to addressing ecological and economic challenges that communities in the rural West are facing. Recognizing the importance of these approaches, the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) uses policy engagement, peer learning, and storytelling to empower practitioners to adopt and innovate with cross-boundary, or “all-lands,” management strategies. Our case study series supports this work by highlighting examples of all-lands projects and explaining the tools, processes, and partners important to their organization and implementation. The following case study was developed through interviews with key partners involved with the Teton Creek Corridor project in the heart of Idaho's Teton Valley.

Author

Emery Cowan

Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition

Reviewer

Gina Knudson

U.S. Forest Service

Layout & Design

Jessica Brothers

Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition

Photos

Cover aerial photo courtesy of Kestrel Aerial

Photos on Pages 4, 5, 13: LegacyWorks Group

Photo on Pages 7: Teton Valley Trails and Pathways

Page 8-9: aerial photo courtesy of Kestrel Aerial

Photos on page 10: (Left) LegacyWorks Group (Right) Teton Valley Trails and Pathways,

Photos on page 12- (Left) Teton Valley Trails and Pathways (Right) LegacyWorks Group

Contents

Introduction	4
Key Activities and Outcomes To Date	5
Project Partners and Cooperators	6
Program Funding Sources	7
Photo: Aerial View of Teton Creek	8-9
Enabling Conditions	10
Key Factors in Making it Happen	11
Challenges Encountered	12
Project Takeaways	13-14
Conclusion	14

Acknowledgement

This project was made possible through support provided by the Forest Service, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition and Wallowa Resources under the terms of Cooperative Agreement #16-CA-11132544-032 supporting an All Lands Learning Network. Wallowa Resources is an equal opportunity employer.



Introduction

The waters of Teton Creek emerge from Wyoming's Teton Range just east of the Idaho state line. From there, the creek's path winds west, passing through public lands, skirting farmlands and housing developments, and routing under roads and highways before feeding into the Teton River. Along the way, the creek passes just south of the city of Driggs, Idaho, a 2,000-person community in the center of Teton Valley. While agriculture has long been a core component of the regional economy, the valley's population has swelled in recent decades thanks to other drivers, including ample recreation opportunities, relatively affordable land prices, and job opportunities in nearby Jackson, Wyoming.

Teton Creek is an important community asset, providing vital habitat for wildlife, a key water source for the city of Driggs and local irrigators, and a scenic riparian corridor treasured by locals. However, in the 1990s, the stream channel was dredged and straightened to accommodate development, severely degrading its ecological function and resulting in increased erosion, flood risk, and property damage. Recognizing the corridor's value, a group of four local nonprofits came together in 2014 to protect and restore a 2.5-mile stretch of the creek just beyond Driggs' city limits through a combination of land conservation, riparian restoration, and managed recreation access. The organizations created a collaborative group to jointly lead the effort and, thanks in part to a significant injection of upfront funding

from the LOR Foundation as well as dedicated facilitation from a fifth nonprofit, developed the Teton Creek Corridor (TCC) project.

The project had four core goals:

- Restoration of the historically degraded stream channel and enhancement of stream flows.
- Preservation of working farmlands and wildlife habitat through land acquisitions and conservation easements across county-owned and private lands.
- Construction of a recreation pathway through the corridor.
- Support of land use planning that promotes responsible development and preserves the ecological value of the corridor.

In the seven years since the project began, the partners have notched a number of on-the-ground successes, including the protection of 369 acres through conservation easements and acquisitions and construction of a 2.5-mile community pathway that opened to the public in spring 2021. The partners named intangible accomplishments as well, including deeper relationships and collaborative know-how that have spurred other efforts to advance community-based conservation in the Teton Valley.



Project Snapshot: Accomplishments, Partners and Funding Sources

Key Accomplishments and Outcomes to Date:

- About two cubic feet per second (cfs) of water rights secured for instream flow
- 302 acres put under conservation easement
- 67 acres of land acquired for conservation
- 3 miles of access easements for the community path
- 2.5 miles of gravel pathway constructed, representing a new recreational asset for residents
- More than 15,000 linear feet of stream channel improved or restored
- About \$400,000 in additional funding leveraged from initial LOR Foundation grant
- Increased collaborative capacity among TCC partners
- Greater public appreciation of the Teton Creek corridor
- Over 40 acres of floodplain and riparian forest restored
- More than \$650,000 in work contracted out to local businesses to conduct ecological restoration in the Teton Creek corridor and design and construct the community pathway



Project Snapshot: Accomplishments, Partners and Funding Sources

Partner	Type	Role
Friends of the Teton River	Nonprofit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Led stream channel restoration, stream flow restoration and floodplain restoration and conservation. Led the natural resources and recreation subcommittee during the Teton County comprehensive planning process, which included supportive language for the TCC project. Helped facilitate a major land acquisition in the project area thanks to relationships with longtime landowners. Established relationships with generational landowners and agricultural producers that were important in building support for the TCC project.
Teton Regional Land Trust	Nonprofit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Led land conservation easement and access easement acquisitions. Provided expertise related to real estate transactions, natural resources, wildlife habitat, and farmland protection. Established relationships with landowners whose support was important to the TCC project.
Teton Valley Trails and Pathways	Nonprofit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Led construction of community pathway and elements of access and parking. Led development of interpretive signage for community pathway. Hosted public walks to promote public understanding of the TCC project's goals. Led the transportation subcommittee during the Teton County comprehensive planning process which included supporting language for the community pathway.
Valley Advocates for Responsible Development	Nonprofit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided input on and support for Teton County's subdivision replat ordinance, which was used to eliminate one subdivision planned for the Teton Creek corridor. Helped to successfully advocate for Teton County to reconsider its plans to build a maintenance building in the corridor. Worked with local governments to support the development of an agreement with Grand Targhee Resort to direct mitigation dollars to the TCC project. Provided ongoing advocacy for responsible development in the corridor.
LegacyWorks Group	Nonprofit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitated the work of the collaborative group including meeting planning and facilitation. Served as project manager for TCC project and responsible for many administrative tasks. Led the creation of a governance structure and mechanisms for partner accountability. Performed additional project support tasks including GIS work, project research, grant monitoring, and website design and maintenance. Led shared fundraising efforts and served as primary grant writer or in a support role for grant writing.
Shoshone-Bannock Tribes	Tribal government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided support on interpretive signs and education about the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, as the Teton Creek corridor is within the tribes' original territories. Created a welcome event to bring tribal members to the Teton Creek Corridor pathway and highlight the tribe's past and present-day connection to the area.
City of Driggs	City government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Committed \$50,000 to the next phase of the community pathway and a pedestrian bridge connection.
Teton County	County government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreed to take responsibility for long-term maintenance of the community pathway.

Funding Source	Purpose or Function
Grant from the LOR Foundation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This grant supported partner capacity, facilitation for the collaborative group, specific project outcomes, and land and easement acquisitions that were jointly agreed upon by partners.
Mitigation funding from Grand Targhee Resort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teton County, Wyoming, required Grand Targhee Resort to put up funding to mitigate the impacts of expanding its base area. The resort allocated these dollars to the purchase of a conservation easement on a county-owned property in the Teton Creek corridor that would otherwise have been developed for a new road and bridge facility.
Recreational Trails Program (administered through the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Recreation Trails Program, an assistance program of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration, helped fund construction of the community pathway.
CHC Foundation of Idaho Falls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helped support construction of the community pathway.
Community Foundation of Teton Valley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helped support construction of the community pathway.
USDA Forest Service Landscape Scale Restoration Program (administered by the Idaho Department of Lands)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This competitive grant program supports landscape-scale projects on state and private forest lands that address state-identified forest management priorities and leverage public and private resources. This program funded planning and materials for Friends of the Teton River to restore 32 acres of riparian forests within the corridor and to provide educational opportunities.
Clean Water Act Section 319(h) funds (administered by the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These funds aim to help state and tribal agencies implement nonpoint source water pollution management programs. Grant dollars supported stream bank, stream channel, and floodplain restoration in the Teton Creek corridor.
American Rivers Connecting Communities to Rivers Grant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This grant program aims to improve family-friendly recreational opportunities and protect rivers and surrounding open space. Grant dollars contributed to the acquisition of land and water rights.
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Bring Back the Natives Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This program supports activities that restore, protect, or enhance populations of sensitive or listed fish species. Funding was used for Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout habitat restoration in the corridor.
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This program provides assistance to landowners to restore and enhance wildlife habitat on their property. Funding was used for upland restoration in the Teton Creek corridor to benefit big game.
Private donations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported construction of the community pathway.







Teton Creek, shown below as it passes near the community of Driggs, Idaho, represents a critical ecosystem connection between Grand Teton National Park and the Teton River.

Project Enabling Conditions

Complementary partners

The four nonprofits that started the TCC collaborative group were well primed to work together. In addition to compatible missions, they each had long histories in Teton Valley and thus had deep relationships with community members and familiarity with each other's work. They also had executive directors who were collaborative in nature and had a base level of trust between them. The nonprofits said having four partners, and thus four key decision-makers, was ideal in that it was a small enough group to act nimbly but large enough to allow for a range of complementary skillsets, expertise, and perspectives.



High-potential project

The Teton Creek corridor was viewed as a high-potential, but unaddressed priority by each of the partners. They had all been working on different aspects of conservation in the corridor in the years prior to 2014 that would be complemented by the new project. For example, Friends of the Teton River had already undertaken extensive restoration of the degraded streambed while the Teton Regional Land Trust had acquired or protected lands up and downstream from the project area. Partners also said it was important that the elements of the TCC project aligned with preexisting community-generated plans, including the county's comprehensive plan, a recreation master plan and an economic development plan. That fact helped make a strong argument for the project as an effort that reflected the desires of the overall community, not just the nonprofits. Combined, the backing from public policy and the enthusiasm from local nonprofits helped make the TCC project an easier sell when the opportunity for funding came along.



Key Factors in Making it Happen

Significant startup funding

While many promising ingredients were in place for the TCC project, partners agreed it wouldn't have become a reality without a sizeable funding infusion from LOR, a private foundation that supports locally-driven solutions that improve the quality of life in rural areas across the West. LOR had been looking to support community-based conservation in the Teton Valley and the TCC project stood out as an idea that integrated many of LOR's priorities. The foundation's grant was structured in a unique way that deliberately supported both work on the ground and the general functioning of the TCC collaborative group. One portion of the money went toward supporting several specific project tasks as well as overall partner capacity, which allowed the four nonprofits to commit dedicated staff time to working together collaboratively on the corridor project. A second stream of funding went toward a dedicated facilitator that supported the partners' work together as well as overall project management. A third pool of money was set aside for property and easement acquisitions, which the four partners collectively decided how to spend in order to meet their shared project goals. One interviewee noted the importance of empowering local groups with the authority to allocate those grant dollars, which helped avoid micromanagement or funder biases that can sometimes bog down projects.

Concrete project vision

Before funding the TCC project, LOR solicited a grant proposal from the four partners. Developing the document was the first time the partners had come together to define and quantify the various parts of the project, including goals, timelines, funding sources and budgets, and implementation strategies. Partners said the finished product became a foundational document, providing a blueprint for the project's implementation over the next 10 years. The partners then held annual planning retreats where they revisited that proposal and adapted it as needed.

Facilitation

Partners said dedicated facilitation was crucial for keeping the project on track and creating a structured way for the partners to work together. At the beginning of the project, LegacyWorks Group, the dedicated facilitator, helped the group develop foundational documents for working together, including the original grant proposal to LOR, the governance structure, a participation agreement and a strategy for how the partners would communicate publicly about the project. As the project progressed, LegacyWorks not only managed meetings, administrative tasks and partner accountability, but also filled in where the partners didn't have time or experience. That included GIS work, project research, grant monitoring and writing, and website design and maintenance.

Commitment to collective decision-making

While the partners each naturally took the lead on different aspects of the TCC project, the group as a whole continued to make decisions collectively (and by unanimous consent) on issues that affected the overall direction of the project. This included all expenditures of the LOR grant dollars. One partner noted that the collaborative's bi-weekly and then monthly facilitated meetings and their formal decision-making framework promoted crucial dialogue and deliberation on bigger issues, while still enabling the group to act efficiently.

Board engagement

As the project progressed, the boards of each of the nonprofit partners became more deeply engaged with one another, which helped establish more durable and multi-scaled relationships between the organizations. The partners said increasing the boards' engagement with the work on the ground and with each other increased their overall support for the project, making it easier for nonprofit staff to justify spending time on it. Such support was especially important in a few instances when decision-making on the project required board approval.

Challenges Encountered

Inclusivity and representation

While the group of four nonprofits allowed the TCC collaborative to operate relatively efficiently, the partners also recognized that they did not represent the full diversity of interests in and around the Teton Valley community. As one remedy, the group created an advisory group and recruited representatives from entities such as the Hispanic Resource Center. The advisors provided input on the overall vision and served as informal ambassadors for the project but were not full partners with decision-making authority. Even that approach had some shortfalls, though. For example, one partner noted that it wasn't fair or realistic to expect one person to represent the full scope of needs and perspectives held by the area's diverse Hispanic population. Another partner said that while the advisory group was brought in early in the project, it could have been better developed and engaged throughout implementation.



Competition for funding

A small community like Teton Valley has a limited base of local donors. With the introduction of the TCC project, partners were concerned that such a large, expensive initiative would draw upon the same donor dollars they had long relied on for their core operations. To avoid that outcome, the partners were deliberate about seeking funding from outside the community, thanks in part to assistance and connections from LegacyWorks. They also made clear to donors that the funding needed for the corridor project was separate from their operational needs. After a large capital campaign early on in the project timeline fell flat, partners found more success fundraising for specific, tangible elements like finishing the pathway or re-surveying a subdivision.



Joint communications

While the partners had similar goals for the TCC project, they diverged in some aspects of their missions and their tactics for fulfilling those missions. Valley Advocates for Responsible Development, for example, has a strong advocacy focus and pursues litigation as part of its strategy, while the Teton Regional Land Trust works hard to remain apolitical and avoid activism. Determining when and how the TCC collaborative would speak with one voice was thus a potential challenge. Partners said they averted any major conflicts thanks in part to the communications strategy they developed at the beginning of their work together. The strategy outlined different communications and confidentiality protocols associated with different phases of the project and established mutually agreed-upon talking points. It also called for a brand and website for the project that was distinct from the four nonprofits, making it possible for partners to disassociate themselves from the brand if needed. Doing this up-front work meant that when a partner wanted to engage on a particular issue related to the project, the group had a process for discussing and agreeing upon which points or messages could be attributed to the collaborative and which points needed to be explicitly described as coming from an individual partner. Establishing that approach ensured the partners' participation in the collaborative didn't risk their reputation and relationship with members and constituents.

Project Takeaways

Benefits of partners expanding outside their typical scope of work

The project's integration of riparian restoration, community-oriented land conservation, and recreation access made it unique from each of the partners' other work, which they all agreed was beneficial. Friends of the Teton River, for example, had been working on restoring Teton Creek for decades. The nonprofit found that the recreation and community access focus of the TCC project helped break through "funder fatigue" because it looked and felt different from much of the organization's previous work.

Importance of governance documents

Partners established a participation agreement at the beginning of the TCC project, which outlined expectations for involvement, a consensus decision process, and rules for working collaboratively. They said the document itself, and the process of creating it, was beneficial for a number of reasons. One partner said it established efficient and expected means of working together and making decisions, and supported trust building between the partners. Others said the expectations for participation laid the foundation for respectful relationships and ensured all partners were equally committed to and onboard with the project's direction. Additionally, having mutually agreed-upon ground rules helped the partners maintain the same culture of working together despite inevitable transitions in leadership. The group also found different phases of the project required different levels of structure. At the start of the project, when land and easement acquisitions and riparian restoration work were happening simultaneously, the partners relied on more detailed planning tools like Gantt charts. During phases of the project with fewer moving parts, it wasn't as important to stick with those more involved structures.

Keys for creating broadly supported conservation projects

Views toward conservation are both varied and variable among elected officials and community members in the Teton Valley. Operating in this environment, partners said, produced lessons learned for developing durable, broadly supported conservation projects in conservative-leaning rural communities. For one, the partners noted the importance of the TCC project's aim to preserve working lands and the values they provide, which aligns with the valley's longtime agricultural identity. It was also important that the collaborative's work on conservation, restoration, and recreation access in the corridor directly addressed points identified in the county comprehensive plan, a recreation master plan, and an economic development plan. That fact further strengthened the project's connection to community priorities, which, according to one partner, was a major reason why the City of Driggs and Teton County were willing to commit funding and staff time toward different aspects of the community path. Another key aspect was that the project relied exclusively on private dollars and federal funding sources, so it brought new money into the community, rather than drawing on local government coffers, which could have generated unnecessary controversy.

Aside from the project's vision and logistics, the partners said they would have struggled to gain broad backing if their organizations weren't locally led and deeply embedded in the Teton Valley community. They also maintained frequent engagement with city and county officials and, when appropriate, invited staff and elected leaders to their collaborative meetings to share updates and allow for direct dialogue on the project, which helped foster support among those local governments. Looking to the future, partners hoped that community appreciation of the project would continue to increase as more people began to explore the public pathway, which had just opened at the time of this document's publication.

(Continued on next page)

Project Takeaways

Collaboration begets more collaboration

Working so closely with one another year after year generated a collaborative momentum among the partners that spawned new ideas, inspired more joint grant applications, and facilitated new partnerships. Partners said they would often meet for TCC meetings and, midway through, find themselves brainstorming future project ideas. As one partner put it “when you’re used to collaborating with someone else, it’s really easy to go collaborate on other things because you already know their mission, their capacity, their board.” For example, an opportunity to build a river access point came up during the course of the TCC project and because several of the partners had already been working with each other they were able to quickly assemble to purchase the land.

Lessons on tribal engagement

The Teton Creek corridor is within the original territories of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes. About six years into the TCC project, the collaborative connected with the tribes’ Language and Culture Preservation Department to work together on the design of interpretive signage and public events related to the community trail. While the TCC partners originally proposed including a tribal land acknowledgement at a trailhead kiosk, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes’ historical researcher, who helped on project, said the tribes instead decided to create their own welcome message for the sign. The researcher explained that doing so allowed the tribes to introduce the public to their homelands in their own voice, helping underscore their continued presence in and connection to the area. After it was drafted, the message

required approval from the tribes’ culture committee and tribal council, which took several months and required some shifts to the TCC project timeline. A TCC partner and the tribes’ historical researcher referenced that process as one that exemplified the need for non-tribal partners looking to work with tribes to acknowledge tribes as sovereign governments with their own distinct procedures, policies and protocols that must be incorporated into project planning. TCC partners and the tribes’ historical researcher also noted the importance of engaging with tribes early and often in a project. Doing so can help ensure adequate time and opportunity for tribes to share their experiences, skills, and expertise during project development, and for tribal knowledge, preferences, and protocols to be thoughtfully incorporated into planned activities. Speaking more broadly to nonprofits looking to work with tribes, the historical researcher shared these words of advice:

- Start by researching the tribe’s history. If appropriate, politely ask the tribe for resources that accurately reflect its history.
- Make sure to understand a tribe’s capacity, including resources and staff time, to engage on a particular project.
- Consider how to move beyond land acknowledgements and other tribal recognition messages to take more meaningful actions regarding tribal homelands, such as securing access for tribal citizens to natural and cultural resources on land trusts or conservation easements, or even returning lands to tribes.

Conclusion

As of this case study’s publication, the TCC partners were wrapping up the initial phase of the project as they had originally envisioned it. Looking ahead to the future, partners said an extension of the community path is in the works and ideas are already emerging for future projects that integrate conservation, restoration, habitat improvement, and recreation access.

To learn more about the Teton Creek Corridor project, visit: www.tetoncreekcorridor.org