

The Leader

Thousands of trees later, a long-damaged valley is roaring back



Lua and Brynn from Swan School, left to right, are happy to get their grand fir tree in the ground. PHOTO COURTESY OF NORTHWEST WATERSHED INSTITUTE

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Leader Staff

Northwest Watershed Institute's field crew and student volunteers wrapped up the 2026 planting season, digging in a total of 18,900 native trees and shrubs to restore wetlands and streams in the Tarboo Valley near Quilcene.

The planting season, now in its 20th year, revolves around the Plant-A-Thon, where students from local schools come out for a day to plant trees at areas prepared by the NWI crew. This year, more than 100 students from Swan School, OCEAN and Sunfield School planted trees at three separate Plant-A-Thon events.

According to Peter Bahls, NWI's director, the 500-acre preserve was once historically productive salmon and wildlife habitat.

"Original government land surveys from the late 1800s indicate that the Tarboo valley was covered with spruce and cedar forest, wetlands and meandering streams, that were then cleared and drained for pasture," Bahls said. "Starting twenty years ago, NWI re-meandered the ditched creek to help restore salmon spawning and rearing areas and provide wetlands for amphibians, birds and mammals."



Selin Sezgun and Shovi Scoggins from OCEAN K-12 School at the March Plant- A-Thon.
PHOTO BY MIKE DONALD

While working to rehabilitate the area, NWI staff and team members have battled challenges such as invasive weeds, poor plant survival and have experimented with new planting methods. The team often learns by trial and error.

“Over the years, NWI has been developing an innovative method to control reed canary grass by planting live stakes, bare root, and potted plants through an overlapping bed of cardboard that shades out the invasive grass,” said Wesley Meyers, stewardship director at NWI. “This herbicide-free method allows the live stakes to grow to a size where they can out-compete reed canary grass and replace it with diverse wetland plants that provide food and shelter for wildlife.”

To make it possible for the NWI crew and volunteers to work in the wetlands, the crew constructed temporary boardwalks with wood donated from Carl’s Lumber. The crew then laid out more than seven tons of biodegradable cardboard sheets at 12 planting sites.

The restoration work has been funded over the past four winter planting seasons by Washington State Conservation Commission’s Riparian Grant Program and administered by the Jefferson County Conservation District.

The plantings are part of a long-term project by NWI to protect and restore fish and wildlife habitat from the headwaters of Tarboo Creek to Tarboo-Dabob Bay. Since 2002, NWI has been worked to conserve and restore nearly 5,000 acres in the watershed, working with volunteers, willing landowners, and 40 partnering organizations.