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CARING FOR PUBLIC LANDS

National Public Lands Day observance helps foster greater sense of stewardship, appreciation for our natural resources while cleaning up, maintaining ecosystem

Marisa Petrich / Northwest Guardian

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Last week, Todd Zuchowski sat on the bank of a perfectly rectangular pool at Joint Base Lewis-McChord Earthworks with his young son.

Right now, the collected stormwater piped in from Lewis North looks more or less like a giant puddle with steep banks. But Zuchowski, a Directorate of Public Works Fish and Wildlife biologist, and community volunteers spent the better part of Nov. 15 adding native plants to make the area a real, working ecosystem. It was just one of several projects JBLM Fish and Wildlife hosted for its sixth annual observance of National Public Lands Day.

“We usually shoot for projects that will benefit the community and wildlife,” JBLM Fish and Wildlife biologist Jim Lynch said.

The day of volunteering officially took place in September, with events across the nation designed to clean, maintain and improve public lands. This year 180,000 volunteers participated in over 2,000 events. The hope is to foster a sense of stewardship and an appreciation of natural resources, especially as outdoor recreation space becomes increasingly rare.

Though JBLM’s events were held a little late (organizers were waiting for grant funding for the projects to be approved) the spirit of the event was the same. In addition to adding native plants to the stormwater retention pond, about 12 volunteers helped build planter boxes and bee boxes to be used across JBLM. Really, the two go hand in hand: the planter boxes will provide a space for seeds of native prairie plants to grow until the can be transplanted, and the bee boxes will shelter the creatures that pollinate them.

The volunteers also helped make planter boxes to be installed at the JBLM community garden, where people can get outdoors and grow anything they’d like, from flowers to food.

Protecting native plant species and providing gardening space are important projects, to be sure, but there is another angle at work here.

“Really it provides us a link to get volunteers and others involved,” Lynch said.

Public lands are frequently misused and taken for granted, according to Lynch, and getting the community involved is an important part of preserving them. A space can look entirely different when you’re out working in it than if you are, say, tossing some trash out your window as you drive through.

For Army spouse Karli Merle, a frequent volunteer, Public Lands Day was an educational opportunity.

“Every event that I’ve attended I’ve learned something about sustainability in general,” she said as she added paint to a newly-made bee box.



Fish & Wildlife employee John Richardson uses an edger to clear grass away from an area to plant trees and bushes for Public Lands Day Nov. 14, 2011 at JBLM Earthworks.



At events like these, she donates a few hours of her day and in return has learned how to cut her power bill, what she can and can't recycle and even taken advantage of a few networking opportunities. In fact, given the benefits, Merle doesn't see why more people don't volunteer.

"It really doesn't take as much time as you think," she said.

Back at the retention pond, Zuchowski pointed out a frog to his toddler before getting back to work with the plants. He's been participating in the annual event for the past five years, and thinks it's important to get people involved for more than just environmental reasons. It also helps change people's perception of JBLM.

"They have kind of a narrow picture ... Joint Base is more than just military operations," he said.

When the project is completed, the area will resemble a local marsh, complete with native wildlife — and even the occasional person.

"These are public lands, federally owned lands, and everybody should be able to enjoy them and participate in taking care of them," he said.

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