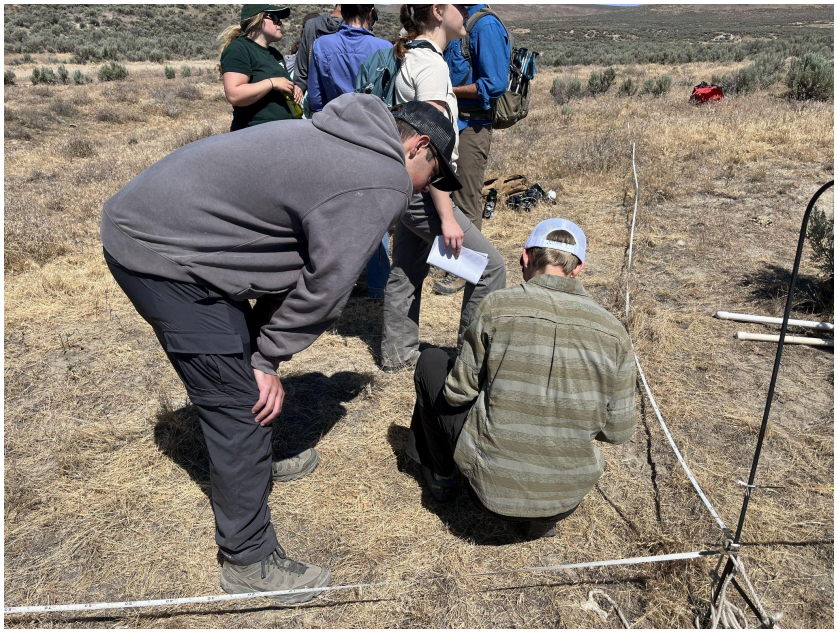
Summer crew gains job experience as well as valuable skills

High Desert Partnership's summer seasonal program offers those ages 16 and up a chance to learn new skills

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by Lauren Brown

This summer 19 individuals got the opportunity to learn more about potential career paths while gaining practical experience as part of the High Desert Partnership's Summer Crew.

Josey Wilson is the High Desert Partnership's Harney Basin Ecological Coordinator and served as the supervisor for the seasonal crews by providing guidance and support. The program, also called the High Desert Partnership Seasonal Program, provides a wide variety of opportunities for individuals to gain hands-on experience across multiple natural resource fields. It's open to ages 16 and up and includes participants ranging from high school and college students to recent graduates and beyond.



One of the program's goals is to strengthen the local workforce by providing meaningful paid employment opportunities for high school and college students. This fosters career exploration, professional development, and hands-on learning. Wilson noted that through partnerships with federal and state agencies and local producers, participants gain real world experience across a variety of fields including natural resources, agriculture, wildfire management, and food systems.

The program equips seasonal employees with transferable technical skills, builds professional networks, enhances resumes, and exposes participants to diverse career pathways while developing communication, leadership, teamwork and problem-solving abilities. "By investing in local youth and young professionals, the program helps cultivate a skilled workforce, creates pathways to future employment and supports the long-term vitality and resilience of the Harney Basin by encouraging individuals to live, work, and contribute to their communities," Wilson said.

Not only does the program benefit individuals, but it also helps High Desert Partnership's collaboratives, such as the Harney Basin Wetlands Collaborative and the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative, with the work they do. "The ecological positions support the collaboratives by providing local workforce to increase the pace and scale of work being done by collaborative partners," said Melissa Petschauer, Ecological Programs Coordinator for the High Desert Partnership.

The Summer Crew consists of seven different crews or internships. They include:

Habitat Crew: The Habitat Crew works on the Oregon Rangeland Monitoring Protocol, a long-term monitoring effort designed to evaluate the effectiveness of rangeland restoration treatments. Their work involves collecting data to help land managers determine whether treatments, such as spraying invasive weeds, have improved overall ecosystem function.



Fire Internship Program: In partnership with Treasure Valley Community College (TVCC), the Fire Ready Program provides participants with an opportunity to earn college credit while gaining experience in wildlife management and natural resource work. The crew assists the Burns and Hines fire departments with the Residential Defensible Space Program, which helps protect homes and communities from wildfire risk. They also conduct post-wildfire rangeland monitoring, tracking plant species survival and burn severity to assess ecosystem recovery and contribute to long-term fire resilience across the region.

Stream Crew: The Stream Crew works alongside the U.S. Forest Service to conduct Aquatic Inventory Surveys on the Malheur National Forest, collecting vital data on fish habitat and stream conditions. They divide streams into habitat units, such as pools and riffles, based on water flow, and measure each unit's length, width, and depth. The crew also documents surrounding vegetation, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of stream health and supporting long-term aquatic ecosystem management.

Post-Fire Monitoring Crew: The Post-Fire Crew assists the U.S. Forest Service with a long-term vegetation monitoring protocol designed to quantitatively track changes in plant communities over time, particularly in post-fire conditions. Their work focuses on collecting precise repeatable data using line-point intercept methods to measure vegetation cover, litter, rock, and soil surface conditions. This information helps land managers evaluate ecosystem health, including resistance to erosion, water infiltration capacity, and the ability of forested sites to resist and recover from degradation.

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Intern: The ODFW intern assists with fisheries monitoring and management activities, including electrofishing surveys, hook-and -line sampling, and fish population estimate surveys. Through these efforts, the intern gains hands-on experience with fisheries field techniques, data collection and aquatic resource management while working alongside ODFW biologists.

Malheur National Wildlife Refuge Intern: The Malheur National Wildlife Refuge intern works in close coordination with MNWR staff to conduct vegetation and aquatic inventory surveys across the refuge. They assist with field data collection, monitoring, and documentation to support refuge management and conservation objectives.

Food Systems Intern: Food system interns assist with event coordination, Farmers Market preparation, Art in the Park youth program, community garden work, field and crop variety trials and harvesting.

Hands-on experience

For those who are going to school and want to learn more about potential career options in their field, the HDP summer crew offers valuable hands-on experience.

Taylor Trent attends Lane Community College. She plays volleyball and would eventually like to earn a degree in sports management and marketing. As one of the Food Systems Interns, she got to see firsthand how community food operations work in Harney County. She noted that one of the most satisfying parts of the job this summer was working on the Crane field. “We planted in June and everything grew so much,” she said. “It was very satisfying to see how much the crops grew each week and rewarding to know that the hard work we put in was paying off.”

Trent worked as a food systems intern last year as well and enjoyed seeing how much the program has grown since the previous summer. “I enjoyed having more responsibility this summer, continuing to work on important projects and events,” she said.” This included helping with the Resilient Basin dinner as well as the event and logistics planning side of the job.



Gaven Horrell is a junior at Burns High School. He would like to either be an engineer or work in fish and wildlife someday. He was part of the HDP Oregon Rangeland Monitoring Program this summer. The part of the job he liked best was clearing fuel from alleyways. He learned that “cheatgrass is no fun” and why it is so important to those who work on the range to reduce invasive species such as cheatgrass. Next year, he would like to apply for the fire internship program.

Asher Devine just graduated from Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania where he studied environmental science and biology. He would like a career that involves habitat restoration or urban parks. He was the lead on the Habitat Crew this summer. He noted that being the crew lead was a little more involved than he expected. It involved a lot of planning and thinking about team dynamics. However, one of the most satisfying aspects of the work this summer was building his leadership and people skills. Ultimately, he enjoyed the collaboration and working with different personalities. He learned how to lead with optimism, energy and good faith and found that it helps to think ahead. If he’s still doing seasonal work next year, he would like to come back and work for HDP again. “I kind of wish I could do the summer again knowing what I know now,” he said as part of his exit interview.

Wilson said that one of her favorite parts of the job is watching those in the summer crew program grow over the summer. “For some, this is their first job in natural resources, and it is incredibly rewarding to watch them learn, absorb new information, gain confidence and take pride in their work,” she said.

Gaining experience while helping the community

While the summer crew positions can help students and those starting out on a potential career path gain skills and knowledge, the work that is done through these positions also helps the various collaboratives supported by High Desert Partnership.

Kellie Frank is HDP’s former Harney County Food Systems Coordinator and said that food systems interns get exposure to the work being done by the Harney Water Collaborative. “They understand why our crop variety trials are so important,” Frank said. They see firsthand how these trials help to determine which alternative crops can be grown with less water in Harney County’s high desert environment.

Frank noted interns are also exposed to the Biz Harney Opportunity Collaborative as they attend meetings and assist with event coordination for small business events. “They see the support we provide to agriculture and other small business startups,” she said.

The fire internship positions, also known as the Fire Ready Crew, rotate through multiple local resource agencies. Applicants are generally high school aged or recent high school graduates. They work with federal agencies and state agencies on fire awareness, prevention and suppression support. But they also learn more about wildland and urban firefighting from an on-the-ground perspective with professional mentors. “They get a chance to talk one-on-one with their agency mentor about career pathways, the reality of their workday, as well as training and education that may be required to enter specific jobs,” said Denise Rose, Youth Changing the Community Collaborative Coordinator.

All the summer crew positions support partner work with High Desert Partnership. “The beauty of having Youth Changing the Community partners engaged is that we are able to talk with students about the work as more than just a summer job,” Rose said. It’s a life learning experience, which is one of the goals for the Youth Changing the Community Collaborative. The monitoring and recruiting work that the wildfire, forest, wetland and food systems collaborative partners need can also be accomplished through the work done by the summer crew positions.

Rose said she recalled many quality learning experiences for the summer crew this year. This included the Fire Ready Crew getting called up over Fourth of July to travel to Colorado for two weeks as a camp crew and helping residents clean up property when the fires came close to town this summer.

However, one of the most gratifying stories from the summer crew was working with a student who had taken a forestry class at Burns High School last year. The class included fire training and granted six credit hours from TVCC. The student then applied for a position on the HDP Fire Ready Crew and worked to earn Continuing Work Experience credits for his summer job, which was another six credit hours. “He met all of his curriculum requirements in spite of being evacuated for two weeks this summer,” Rose said. She noted that after his June graduation, he had no desire to go to college. But after talking with TVCC instructors, he found he was only six credits away from a wildland firefighting certificate. Friends on the crew encouraged him, and he registered at TVCC and started classes on campus in September. “His plan has always been to fight fire, but now he’s wondering if he can build on that certificate to earn an associate’s degree,” Rose said.

Helping people see all the potential career paths is a highlight for those working with the HDP summer crew. Wilson said it brings her so much joy to see crew members become excited about careers in natural resources. “Knowing that HDP can provide them with hands-on experience, mentorship and an opportunity to explore different aspects of the field, makes this program particularly rewarding,” she said. “Watching them take those experiences and continue building their own career paths is one of the most fulfilling parts of my work.”

This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting seven collaboratives in southeast Oregon.

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