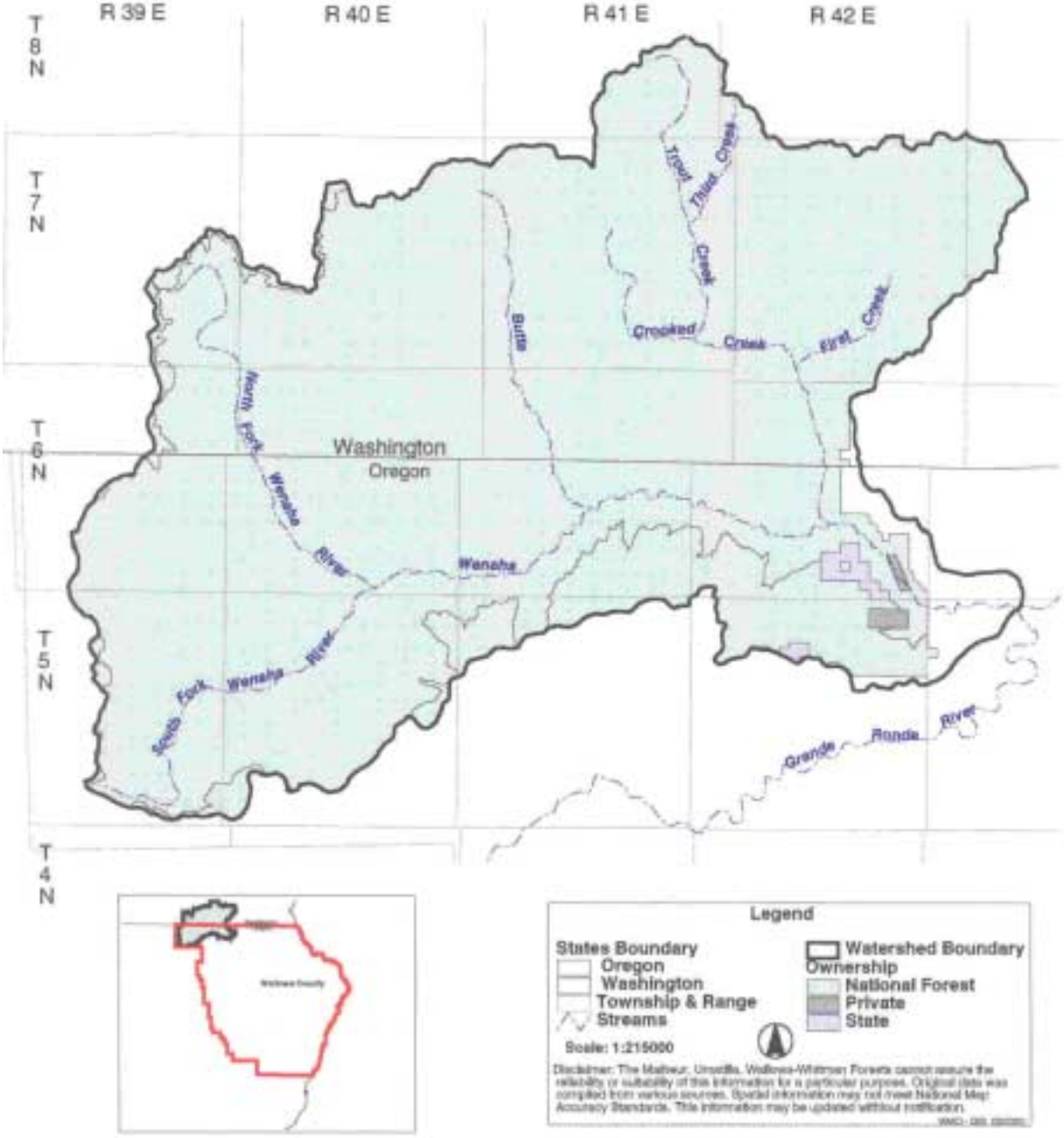
Wenaha River

(1 Reach)



WENAHA RIVER[9]

The Wenaha River was analyzed in one reach since it is located primarily within the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness. The Wenaha River, located in the extreme northwest corner of Wallowa County, rises in the Wenaha-Tucannon Wilderness and flows about 22 miles to join the Grande Ronde near the town of Troy.

The Wenaha River (together with the Imnaha and Lostine Rivers) historically had the largest runs of spring chinook in Wallowa County. Spring chinook spawn from three miles above Milk Creek (a South Fork Wenaha tributary) downstream to Crooked Creek, a distance of 18.6 miles, in Milk Creek upstream one-third mile above the mouth, and in Butte Creek upstream approximately 1.5 miles (ending in Washington State). The run size has declined significantly since the mid-1960's when index surveys were standardized as to length, location, and time of year. Index areas were chosen because the majority of spawning occurs in the index reach. The index area is in the South Fork from Milk Creek downstream to the forks, a distance of 5.5 miles. The average redd count in the index area from 1964 to 1973 was 181.0 redds. The average redd count from 1979 to 1988 was 37.5 redds. The average redd count from 1989 to 1998 was 26.4 redds.

Grande Ronde and Snake River stocks of fall chinook may use or have used the lower portions of the Wenaha for spawning; however, documentation is limited.

Water Quantity

Tree Density (Medium Priority).--*Dense thickets of trees resulting from past fire suppression prevent much of the rain and snow from reaching the ground, and consequently the moisture is lost to the drainage through evaporation or sublimation.*

> A long term policy of fire depression is the primary cause of tree density. Maintenance of healthy watershed conditions, by reducing fuel loads as mentioned below under fuel density, will provide an optimal, sustainable supply of water. Healthy watershed and forest conditions will also supply the water at the optimal times for salmon through snowpack melt and groundwater recharge and release.

Water Quality

Excess Fine Sediments (High Priority).--*Catastrophic fire would probably put high sediment loads into the river. At the present time this is not a problem.*

> Avoid excess peak flows and related bank erosion by keeping enough watershed vegetation to slow runoff and promote groundwater recharge. (See "Fuel Density" in this section).

Fuel Density (High Priority).--*Excessive fuel density in this watershed is presently a high risk for a catastrophic fire, such as the Tanner Gulch Fire, that would probably result in*

[9]See also Watershed Management - Approaches to Implementing Solutions

severe water quality problems. Past fire suppression practices have contributed to the risk of fire.

Prescribed burning in the wilderness, done judiciously, can help reduce the fuel levels and provide fire breaks to prevent large uncontrollable fires. In some cases, especially in riparian areas, fuel rearrangement (piling or putting the fuels near the ground to facilitate rotting, judiciously placing fuels to protect streambank, or placing large woody debris in stream to add to stream structure) may be preferable to burning in order to keep the organic material as part of the ecosystem, preserve shade, and prevent sedimentation. Well managed grazing also helps to reduce light "flash" fuels.

Stream Structure

Ice Flows (Low Priority).--*Ice flows occur during many winters. Ice flows can scour the streambed and destroy stream structure.*

Preserve riparian conifers to provide thermal cover, and preserve larger trees on the bank which may break up or slow ice flows. Look into dynamiting smaller ice jams before they result in habitat destruction.

Substrate

Physical Barriers (Low Priority).--*Large log jams can provide a physical barrier to fish.*

Fish can get through many log jams, but jams should be monitored and if they are actually providing a barrier, enough material should be removed to provide passage.

Habitat Requirements

No problems were identified.