

New trail opens to North Head Lighthouse

By KATIE WILSON
EO Media Group

ILWACO, Wash. — One of the most popular spots at Cape Disappointment State Park, North Head Lighthouse, is also one of its least developed.

But that is changing, said Tom Benenati, ranger and assistant park manager at Cape Disappointment.

Now open is a trail extension that runs more or less parallel to North Head Lighthouse Road, following a portion of the original historical lighthouse access road, and winds through marbled murrelet nesting habitat.

Construction on the multi-use trail began last spring. After getting delayed by weather, construction mostly wrapped up right before Christmas.

"I think what's most exciting is just the connection to the lighthouse and the Discovery Trail," said Park Manager Evan Roberts.

Big upgrade

Until recently, the road leading up to North Head Lighthouse was not a safe place to walk or bike. But travelers coming up the 8.5-mile-long Discovery Trail that stretches from Long Beach to Ilwaco had limited options. If they stopped at the Beards Hollow parking lot in the state park, they could jump on a primitive 1-mile-long hiking trail and reach the North Head Lighthouse parking lot that way, or they could continue on the Discovery Trail, crossing State Route 100 and then jumping onto a paved State Parks trail. But that trail ended where North Head Lighthouse Road began.

Park employees are excited to be able to offer visitors another option now, Benenati said. What they had before was "really inadequate to handle the demand."

The park is planning a more elaborate opening of the trail extension for late



Photo courtesy of Jim Sayce

A new paved trail now links Washington State Route 100 with North Head Lighthouse, tying in with Cape Disappointment State Park's world-class system of walking/bicycling paths. The new trail spur permits pedestrians to reach one of Washington state's most spectacular seaside viewpoints with a minimum of exposure to vehicular traffic.

spring; meanwhile, contractors are still tidying up, testing restrooms and making small final tweaks to the project, said Virginia Painter, spokesperson for the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission.

The 2,000-foot-long extension and improvements to the parking lot were paid for in part by a \$1.6 million grant from the Recreation and Conserva-



Evan Roberts

tion Office, spending that was authorized back in 2011, and from a budgeted \$150,000 dedicated solely to North Head Lighthouse area improvements.

Complications

"These are challenging trails to build, but feasible," said Roberts.

The challenges of this particular trail extended beyond the high costs of constructing it. The trail goes

through habitat used by the marbled murrelet, a small sea bird whose preferred nesting habitat is old-growth trees and which is listed as threatened in Washington, Oregon and California under the Federal Endangered Species Act. It posed a great educational opportunity for visitors, but also a delicate balance for park stewards to maintain.

Contractors had to identify exactly which trees they were going to cut down to make way for the trail while avoiding the trees the birds prefer for nesting.

They worked during periods when the birds would not be present. Park rangers closed down the trail from the Beards Hollow parking lot to further limit exactly how many people would be tromping around in the birds' nesting habitat once the trail extension opened. The park decided not to provide much by way of "trail amenities" like trash cans and benches along the trail extension to further discourage people from leaving trash in the area.

The park also abandoned plans to continue a multiuse

trail from North Head Lighthouse down to the ranger station.

"That (would have been) really challenged and would have been cost-prohibitive," Roberts said.

Also, there would have been no way to avoid affecting the murrelets and would have even likely required an incidental take permit, a permit allowing activities that could harm or impact listed species, Roberts added — something the federal Fish and Wildlife Service was not interested in allowing.

Drilling plan near volcano dropped

By The Columbian

A Canadian mining company has for now dropped its pursuit of an exploratory drilling project near Mount St. Helens, prompting environmental advocates to declare victory after a prolonged legal fight.

Ascot Resources, along with the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, agreed late last month to voluntarily dismiss appeals aiming to keep the project alive. The action followed an earlier court opinion that sided with opponents of the drilling on many key arguments.

"We think this is it, and we consider it a win, after working on it for a decade," said Matt Little, executive director of the Gifford Pinchot Task Force.

The decision likely won't be the end of the controversy, however. BLM plans to work with Ascot to develop a revised environmental assessment this year and possibly issue new drilling permits, said agency spokesman Michael Campbell.

Ascot's plan was the third time since 2004 that a company has attempted to drill or develop a mine in the area, according to the task force, a Vancouver-based advocacy group.

The most recent proposal was reviewed by the forest service and BLM, both of which approved it in 2012.

Ascot Resources had hoped to carry out exploratory drilling in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, just north of the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument boundary. The company planned to look for copper, silver, gold and other minerals by drilling 63 holes at 23 different sites north of the mountain.

The exploration never happened. After an unsuccessful administrative appeal, the Gifford Pinchot Task Force filed a lawsuit aiming to block the drilling, citing environmental impacts and other concerns. That led to a July 2014 opinion from the U.S. District Court in Oregon finding earlier review and approval of the plan inadequate, and, ultimately, the decision by Ascot

and others to drop it.

Opponents had argued that exploratory drilling could cause significant harm to a sensitive natural area, particularly wildlife and water in the Green River area. The land, where mining claims go back decades, was purchased by the forest service in 1986 with funding from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, according to the task force. The court's decision on the Ascot plan could impact other areas tied to the same program, said Roger Flynn, director and managing attorney of the Western Mining Action Project.

"The district court's ruling has far-reaching ramifications, as millions of acres of public lands across the country were purchased with LWCF monies," Flynn said in a statement.

As it revisits the Ascot plan, BLM will work to ensure its environmental assessment follows the National Environmental Policy Act, Campbell said. The court ruled that the 2012 assessment violated that law by not considering all al-



Mount St. Helens

ternatives, among other problems.

Despite the most recent setback, Ascot is still inter-

ested in pursuing exploratory drilling in the area, Campbell said, and BLM is still working on the issue.

"Time will tell whether or not the (review) pans out in a way that's going to allow us to move forward," he said.

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