



The Daily Astorian/File Photo

The Astoria Regional Airport is seen surrounded by Youngs Bay and the Lewis and Clark River.

FEMA changes flood insurance approach to protect fish habitat

NOAA gives advice for floodplain development

By ERICK BENGEL
The Daily Astorian

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is changing how it implements the National Flood Insurance Program in Oregon to avoid further destruction of fish habitat.

But the agency's new direction — based on recommendations from the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration — won't disrupt the effort of North Coast communities challenging the data behind FEMA's controversial draft floodplain maps of the region.

The FEMA-administered federal flood insurance program, which subsidizes flood insurance for building and development, influences how development occurs in floodplains.

As a result, the program has changed how many floodplains function, often to the detriment of species protected by the Endangered Species Act, Will Stelle, administrator of NOAA Fisheries West Coast Region, said.

In a biological opinion issued Thursday, NOAA found that the flood insurance program "reduces the floodplain and wetland habitat available to salmon in Oregon, which in turn jeopardizes the continued existence of 15 salmon and steelhead species, plus eulachon and Southern Resident killer whales," the opinion states.

Under the Endangered Species Act, any action authorized, funded or carried out by a federal agency, like FEMA, must not imperil the continued survival of ESA-listed species, or adversely modify their critical habitat, Michael Milstein, a spokesman for NOAA Fisheries West Coast Region, said in a release.

"Floodplains, of course, are very important to salmon in terms of habitat, but in Oregon that habitat is increasingly endangered," Milstein said.

Recommendations

To avoid additional harm to these species, the opinion gives a set of recommendations for FEMA to follow as the agency administers the flood insurance program.

First, NOAA recommends that FEMA improve floodplain-mapping techniques to more accurately identify the high-risk areas and how those

areas may change in the future.

Second, FEMA should limit new development in the most hazardous, flood-prone areas — often the most beneficial habitat for endangered fish, Milstein said.

Third, FEMA should mitigate development that does proceed in the floodplain by restoring floodplain elsewhere, so recovering native salmon don't face a net loss of habitat.

"NOAA fisheries and FEMA both value endangered species, and we worked together closely on ... these recommendations," Milstein said.

The proposed safeguards — which incorporated feedback from Oregon tribes and local communities — will affect 251 of the 271 communities in Oregon that participate in the flood insurance program, said John Graves, floodplain management and insurance branch chief at FEMA.

"Much of the recommendations that we are making to FEMA today really do go to some of the core components of the (flood insurance program), but doing so from a perspective of how can we enhance the ability to protect floodplain functions that are vital for salmon, both babies and adults," Stelle said.

'A changing world'

Floodplains are a touchy issue on the North Coast.

The city of Warrenton, for example, is challenging the data of FEMA's preliminary flood maps, arguing that the maps overstate the local flood risk.

Property owners and business owners along stretches of riverfront worry that they will have to pay thousands of extra dollars in flood insurance if the questionable maps go into effect.

Last year, five Clatsop County agencies — the cities of Warrenton and Astoria, Clatsop County, the Port of Astoria and Diking District No. 9 on the west side of Youngs River — hired Coast & Harbor Engineering to run an analysis and technical review of the data. The agencies hope the ongoing project will lead to FEMA revising the maps.

How do NOAA's recommendations impact the ability of a community or individual to appeal FEMA's maps? They don't, Graves said.

"Our appeals process will remain the same," he said.

Graves added that the first recommendation — the need to use better mapping techniques — speaks to the need to produce accurate maps "in order to know where these floodplains are in a changing world."



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

Photos are shown on a wall of an exhibit about the construction of the Astoria Bridge at the Clatsop County Historical Society's Heritage Museum.

Workers: One died during construction

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Building the bridge

The three men reminisced about being housed at the Astor Hotel and frequenting a bar called the Fur Trader. At the time, they said, the bar was full of fishermen, loggers and construction workers.

Construction on the bridge lasted from November 1962 to August 1966.

O'Brien said he came from McMinnville in 1963 and started Astoria Ready Mix, which provided concrete for the bridge. He stayed in town and raised his children in Astoria.

"I was about 30 years old when I started," O'Brien said. "It was quite an experience for me."

Reagor, who now lives in Kelso, Washington, described working on barges and waiting for tugboats. While waiting, Reagor said, the crew would fish off the barge.

"The superintendent got mad and said we weren't

supposed to be fishing, we were supposed to be working," Reagor said. "I said, 'Well, move the barge and we will quit fishing and do some work.'"

Anderson, now of Vancouver, Washington, said people forget the construction was done in an era when safety standards were not as strict as today.

One person was killed during construction. Anderson said there could have been more fatalities if it wasn't for teamwork and skill. "Everybody had everybody's back," he said.

At the time, the men said, they never thought about the bridge still being used 50 years later. Every time they see the bridge, they think about those youthful days working in Astoria.

"This job was 50 years ago and I always think about the good memories and the good people that were here," Anderson said. "I have traveled all over the world, but this was a very good job."



The Daily Astorian/File Photo

Workers lay the concrete deck on the north spans of the Astoria Bridge 50 years ago.



Joshua Bessex/The Daily Astorian

John Anderson, a crane operator who worked on the Astoria Bridge, speaks at a panel discussion held in the Fort George Lovell Showroom on Wednesday.



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