

Wallacut: 'Fish can move in as soon as it's open'

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Since breaking ground on the project in early September, land trust workers have re-contoured and restored the four channels. They have breached one channel, and will open the other three to tidal flows within the next few weeks, Sinks said.

Reconnecting a river

Almost 100 years ago, farmers built a simple, but effective push-up levee, and installed dikes with tide gates that let water flow out, but not in. Over the years, this low-lying marshy forestland was drained and filled with sand. "Sweeny," as it came to be known, supported a few farms, orchards and a bit of cattle grazing.

The levee did its job, but it also totally cut off the river from the land. Farmers loved it, but the salmon would pay the price.

"It disconnects all that habitat for fish," Sinks said.

Scientists and conservationists are now beginning to understand the critical role that estuaries play in the life cycles of fish. Past restoration efforts often focused on spawning habitat, but research now shows that the tidal zones, where juvenile salmon spend time maturing before heading out to sea, are also very important to their survival.

When a river is reconnected to its historic floodplain, the free movement of water through tidal channels provides refuge for juvenile salmon. Cooler cleaner water is one draw for fish, but the buffet of organisms is another. A host of delectable invertebrates and bugs await the hungry swimmers.

"They come in. They feed. They get out of high flows.



Damian Mulinix/For EO Media Group

The tannin-rich soil often makes the Wallacut River run a very dark color.

They get away from predators. They start to transition, especially in this stretch of the river, to the ocean," Sinks explained.

Sinks said that, once complete, the restored habitat could benefit stocks of fish from the Columbia's many tributaries, including the Grays and Chinook rivers. Coho, Chinook, steelhead and, potentially, chum salmon will all benefit, said Sinks. Sculpin, stickleback, starry flounder and other fish also will seek out the newly restored habitat.

"For a long time, the thinking was that the estuary was just something the fish had to get through," Sinks said. Now, that thinking has changed. "The idea is to make more of this habitat."

Unlocking the past

The path from homestead to salmon habitat has been a long and winding one.

Sinks said a cultural archaeological review found evidence of a historic Native American presence in the area, so land trust workers will leave a few parts of the property untouched, to prevent a potential disturbance of archaeologically sensitive sites.

When homesteaders built the levee, about 100 years after Lewis and Clark passed through, cattle grazed and crops prospered sporadically. As better lands were developed elsewhere, ranchers and farmers gave up on Sweeny. The forest quickly returned, and the structures that dotted the site crumbled and dissolved. By the time the land trust bought the land, just one decrepit house remained. It was soon demolished.

Funding the future

Sinks said the previous owner had purchased

the site with conservation in mind. The stars aligned when Columbia Land Trust, a Vancouver-based group with about a dozen ongoing projects in Oregon and Washington, came looking for a project that could meet their goal of aiding salmon recovery. However, the project still probably would not have been possible without assistance from Bonneville Power Administration.

Under the Endangered Species Act, BPA is required to mitigate the environmental impacts of hydropower development by paying for salmon recovery projects.

"Their objectives align with ours," Sinks said. "Were not in business of mitigation, but we are a private nonprofit focused on restoration."

Boots on the ground

In late September, Sinks toured the site with Caitlin Alcott, a hydrologist and ecol-



David Plechl/EO Media Group

Ian Sinks, a stewardship director with Columbia Land Trust, meets with Caitlin Alcott, an ecologist with Inter-Fluve, the firm that is providing the engineering and design for the Wallacut River restoration project. Sinks is leading the \$170,000 effort aimed at enhancing salmon rearing habitat at Lower Columbia tributaries and their associated estuaries.

ogist with Inter-Fluve, the firm that has provided the engineering and design for most of the project.

Alcott led Sinks hundreds of yards down the riverbank past all four channels, each just a few steps from completion. She explained how work crews had used an excavator to shave the roughly 4-to-6-foot tall levee down in most places. Though the workers followed the contour of the land, and tried to avoid trees and other vegetation, most of the levee now resembles a flat, muddy track. She showed how the excavator operator used a stump and its attached rootwad like a brush to smooth out the track marks.

Henderson Construction is doing the heavy lifting with the help of Johnson and Son's from Naselle.

Farther down river, Alcott showed Sinks one of the newly restored channels. The old fill sand had been removed, and the channel now cuts a sinuous path through the shade

of alders. In the future, the land trust plans to plant some native spruce and evergreens along the banks.

Rainwater had filled in the restored channel and leaves were falling in the water. Bugs and birds were active around its banks.

"Pretty nice huh? If you're a fish," commented Alcott.

The two continued on to a more heavily forested spot where the first of the four channels was breached. Several fallen trees had been artfully placed in the channel. The logs will stabilize the channel banks and provide cover for juvenile fish, Alcott said.

"Fish hotels," she added. "We call it rearing habitat."

The water had already swept in and was now creeping its way back into the Wallacut, carrying with it, leaves, bugs and beetles.

"Fish can move in as soon as it's open," Sinks said. "A lot of the habitat functions start as soon as you reconnect land to water."

Dam: City is seeking to take control of dam

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risk. "The concerns aren't just liability," she said. "The concerns are that it is a flood hazard for us. It causes flooding for us. My district, my constituents are at the risk."

The city's ultimatum comes after an agreement between the city, the water district and the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce to remove the dam and install a single-lane bridge for emergency access fell apart in May amid doubts about the impact on flood control. Questions about whether Kurt Fritsch, the former city manager, should have disclosed skeptical reviews by a city consultant on the dam's removal to the City Commission led to Fritsch's resignation in June.

A fact-finding report by Blitz released Tuesday concluded that the city owns the dam because the water district forfeited a 1962 city easement for the project by raising and eventually removing tide gates over the past few years.

The city contends a 1938 Circuit Court ruling established city title to the land. In his letter Wednesday, Blitz said the only other potential claim might be asserted by the Department of State Lands for the land underneath the structure, but he said the state has not claimed an interest.

The water district has

operated and maintained the dam since it was built with help from the federal government in 1963. The federal government said in 2014 that the water district was free to operate the dam and two other flood control structures on the river as the owner, since the government's interest was complete after the 50-year useful lives of the structures ended.

Ron Smith, the state conservation engineer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service in Portland, said Wednesday that the federal government viewed the water district as "the owner because they had to obtain those land rights to be able to install those structures and to successfully operate and maintain those for the service life of the structures.

"So from our agency perspective, we look at them as an owner of those structures."

The ownership interest, however, is based on the water district's city easement for the project, which the city now maintains the water district forfeited by removing the tide gates.

The city is seeking to take control of the dam and either operate it for flood control or hold the structure as an asset and remove it later to offset wetlands mitigation for a future development project.

Committee: Supporters pressed commissioners to change their minds

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During public testimony Wednesday, a half dozen supporters urged commissioners to change their minds. They said the committee has been meeting for the past four decades, and is a local asset that maintains the livability of the community.

Theodore Lundy, chairman of the Arch Cape committee, said the group offers a way for locals to voice their concerns face-to-face.

"It's like a family meeting down there," Lundy said.

Commissioner Lianne Thompson used Lundy's family analogy to point out not all family members agree. She said many residents felt too vulnerable or at risk to propose their building plans to their neighbors.

"Sometimes those family members had not wished to appear on the record because they have been concerned about their neighbor's negative opinions," Thompson said.

Warrenton: Enrollment likely to grow more

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is averaging 67 students per grade this year, 72 per grade in Warrenton Middle School and 86 per student in the grade school, according to an enrollment report Jeffery gave the board.

"Without another economic upheaval, we'll see that there's more likelihood of increase than decrease," he said.

He estimated the average class size through 2028-29 would be 89. With current enrollment at 1,000, the district's enrollment would increase another 15 percent over the next 12 years. The grade school also hosts high-risk children with behavioral issues from around the county as part of a special education consortium. Jeffery said they, too, need another classroom.

Creative remodeling

A storage room has been remodeled into a classroom. Closets have been turned into work areas for teachers. The library has been consolidated to make room for a multipurpose activity room.

A few years ago, Warrenton became the first school district in the county to offer preschool, in part to fill two empty classrooms in the grade school. Last year, the district spent nearly \$400,000 adding two modular classrooms to avoid increasing class sizes, and is looking at more. On Wednesday, potentially closing the preschool came up as an option to free up two classrooms.

Jeffery estimated that next year, the district would need to add another two teaching positions and remodel a patio outside the art room into an additional classroom, at a potential price tag of \$100,000. He estimated that through 2021-22, the district would need to add three new positions and classrooms to avoid increasing class sizes.

Jeffery said a 20-year full faith and credit bond of \$2 million would cost the district about \$135,000 a year. Business Manager Mike Moha said that's similar to what the district spends each year on facilities maintenance.

The bond would allow the district to remodel the patio area, repair a leaky roof at the high school, add modular



Edward Stratton/The Daily Astorian

Warrenton-Hammond School Board Members took a tour of the short-term fixes staff has made to fit new students into an overcrowded school. The tour included a library consolidated to make way for a new multipurpose activity room.

'My belief is, at best, we have five years to have something in place that will give us more capacity.'

Superintendent Mark Jeffery

at the grade school and add another behavioral-support classroom. The district could also have to try and purchase adjacent property to meet the additional parking requirements for new construction.

Bigger bond

Jeffery said the bond could also allow the district to prepare for a larger bond like Seaside School District's as it decides whether to attempt a larger remodel of its class-

rooms, build a new school or try to build an entirely new K-12 campus.

"My belief is, at best, we have five years to have something in place that will give us more capacity," Jeffery said.



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