

Rescue school: Rescuers are always learning something new

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On Monday, Senior Chief Petty Officer Eric Bednorz from Air Station Mobile stood on the dunes of Clatsop Spit and watched through a set of binoculars while six Coast Guard and two U.S. Air Force rescue swimmers treaded water.

"They're just trying to make it outside," Bednorz said of the swimmers, who traded off playing survivor and rescuer, trying to pull each other through the 5- to 10-foot swells.

The Coast Guard pushes its rescue swimmers past their comfort zone, Bednorz said, "but we want to do that under instruction."

Around the nation

Trainers from Air Station Mobile in Alabama, swimmers, pilots and hoist operators from around the country head each year to the mouth of the Columbia River, which offers rough surf and diverse environments, from the cliffs at Cape Disappointment to the dunes of Clatsop Spit. Swimmers practice maneuvering in the water. Pilots and hoist operators on the Coast Guard's HH-60 Jayhawk and HH-65 Dolphin helicopters practice pulling them away from danger. The entire crew learns how to work together during a rescue.

"The Coast Guard is the best at all rescue-swimmer aspects," said Allen-Mikel Armstrong, one of two pararescuemen on the North Coast this week for training from the Air Force's 212th Rescue Squadron in Alaska.

Jason Hughes, the other pararescueman, said the squadron coordinates closely with the Coast Guard's Air Station Kodiak. The Air Force has similar training in Alaska, he said, but no surf comparable to the North Coast.

Hughes was paired in the surf training with 16-year veteran rescue swimmer Ty Aweau, who served four years with Sector Columbia River and has gone through the training four times.



Coast Guardsmen complete training exercises Monday at Fort Stevens State Park.

Photos by Danny Miller/The Daily Astorian



Senior Chief Petty Officer Eric Bednorz, rescue swimmer and trainer from the U.S. Coast Guard's Air Station Mobile, monitors training exercises from the shore on Monday at Fort Stevens State Park.



A Coast Guard helicopter takes flight above Fort Stevens State Park during training exercises on Monday in Hammond.

Coast Guard established a helicopter rescue swimmer program. In summer 1993, HH-65 Dolphin helicopter air crews started training using the hoisted swimmers near San Francisco and

on the cliffs of Cape Disappointment. With support from a helicopter, swimmers rescued simulated survivors from 200-foot cliffs, wave-swept rocks and heavy surf with ease, improving the

Coast Guard's rescue capabilities in otherwise inaccessible terrain.

Master Chief Darell Gelakoska, who headed the Coast Guard's rescue swimmer program, helped develop the concept of deploying rescue swimmers from helicopters.

It was Gelakoska who recommended that an advanced rescue swimmer training be created to familiarize swimmers with the equipment and conditions they would face in the field. In 1996, a building at North Tongue Point in Astoria was dedicated as the school's home base.

Since then, the Coast Guard held semiannual trainings for pilots, hoist operators, flight mechanics and rescue swimmers from air stations across the country.

Aweau said the dynamic surf environment means rescuers are always learning something new. "Bednorz is aware of the water, what the

ocean does. He brings that knowledge here."

Rescue school

In the mid-1980s, the

Netting: Sportfishing groups don't want 2013 agreement damaged

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seines are a viable alternative to gillnets. Commercial fishers strongly disagree.

Under a 2013 agreement, gillnets were to be phased out in the river's main stem over four years and restricted to off-channel areas. The state was to give recreational fishing in the main stem stronger priority, enhance off-channel hatchery releases for

commercial harvest, and develop alternative gear and techniques.

Sportfishing groups don't want that agreement damaged.

"It is imperative that you stand firm on ensuring the removal of gillnets from the main stem of the Columbia at the end of the transition period" on Dec. 31, Schamp wrote.

While some "adaptive

management" of the plan was expected, he and others argued to the commission, the Fish and Wildlife staff recommendation would increase gillnetters' take of salmon. He said the plan does not guarantee them more revenue.

However, Astoria-based gillnetters, seafood processors and community members say the plan imperils their livelihoods, alternative

fishing methods aren't economically feasible and revision is necessary.

Jim Knight, executive director of the Port of Astoria, said commercial fishing is crucial to the area's economy and multiple other businesses are linked to it.

Astoria gillnetter Otis Hunsinger said 80 percent of his income derives from the Columbia River. He recently bought a second boat and

said the cost of gear, permits and other expenses is a worry. "I'd like to know what the future is," he said.

Lori Steele, executive director of the West Coast Seafood Processors Association in Portland, said the group supports the Fish and Wildlife staff recommendations. Commercial fishers and processors have lost money under the reform plan, she said, and any fish-

eries reform must be fair and flexible.

Michael Finley, the commission chairman, said state statute requires that Columbia River fish management rules be structured in a way that they "enhance the economic viability of recreational and commercial fisheries and the communities that rely on them."

"That's a dual mandate," Finley said.

CREST: Critics of dam's removal cite Blitz's report as proof of wrongdoing

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The city's attorney, however, has since suggested that the federal government likely owns the dam. He also believes the structure is part of the city's levee system and should be overseen by the city with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The city is awaiting clarification from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service, which helped build the dam and two other flood-control structures operated by the water district since the 1960s.

Delved into other issues

Blitz's report also delved into whether former City Manager Kurt Fritsch, CREST and the water district withheld or downplayed information on the potential flooding risk if the dam is removed. Fritsch resigned in June amid questions about the dam.

Critics of the dam's potential removal, including the Nygaard family, which owns Warrenton Fiber and has had long-running antipathy for CREST, have held up Blitz's report as proof of wrongdoing by the task force.

But Blitz has said he

has not made any conclusive findings about CREST. In an email Wednesday, the attorney said his preliminary report has been "mischaracterized as an investigation, which it is not. It summarizes records that were reviewed and does so accurately. It identifies issues raised in the community.

"The focus now needs to be on determining what the city should do with structures and levees, and on those matters which the commission identifies for further review."

Supporters of CREST have bristled over the fact that Blitz spoke with John Nygaard, an attorney, about the dam but did not interview anyone from CREST or the water district.

The report raised questions about CREST's motives and asked whether the task force may have engaged in public corruption or civil rights violations.

Financial benefit

Sinnott's letter to Blitz challenges the idea that CREST would have benefited financially from salmon credits tied to the dam removal project as a "fundamental misunderstanding." The federal Bonneville Power

Administration, which was going to finance the project to help improve salmon habitat, would have received any salmon credits. CREST would have overseen the project.

Nygaard, in a letter to the Bonneville Power Administration in April 2015, said Warrenton Fiber should be compensated for any loss of development rights and for agreeing to allow increased salmon access from its private property near the river.

Sinnott also attacks the doubts raised in the city's report about the engineering plan on the dam's removal that showed no significant flooding risk. The report highlighted a city technical review that questioned whether the engineering plan accurately measured the flood plain.

But Sinnott also points out that the report describes the dam as a potential asset for the city that could be removed later to offset the wetlands impact of a development priority. "From this statement, it appears that the concern with the project is not the risk of flooding or insurance premiums, but the pecuniary interest of the dam as an 'asset' to be used for the benefit of certain private citizens of Warrenton," she wrote.

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