

Cormorants: ‘Maintaining a bridge is a cost that we have to have’

Continued from Page A1

The lethal management plan began in 2015 and ended in 2018. The cormorants abandoned the island several times in those years and, as far as observers can tell, they have not successfully nested on the island since.

Advocates and conservation groups critical of the Army Corps’ actions have called it a complete collapse of a colony that once represented around 40% of the entire double-crested cormorant population west of the Rocky Mountains.

‘An emerging issue’

Thousands of the cormorants have since moved to the Astoria Bridge.

Now the fish-eating birds have become a problem for the Department of Transportation. The cormorants’ guano is corroding a protective paint job on the bridge and their sheer numbers make regular maintenance and inspection work difficult.

Beers-Seydel said cormorants have become an issue on bridges up and down the Oregon Coast.

“This is an emerging issue across Oregon bridges,” she said. “We don’t really have it quantified yet, but as we’re doing work on the bridges, as

we are inspecting the bridges ... we’re finding more and more birds.”

The state is preparing to launch hazing efforts at the Yaquina Bay Bridge in Newport this year as well.

Still, the Astoria Bridge remains a special case.

In 2020, more than 5,000 breeding pairs were counted on the supports and platforms that form the bridge’s understructure. Last year, that number dipped to 4,151. But both counts are estimates and represent only what can be seen and counted in boat and aerial surveys at any given time.

The state has budgeted \$225,000 to contract with crews from the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for three years to haze the birds off the bridge. The state budgeted \$35,000 for hazing at Yaquina Bay, where a much smaller colony of mostly pelagic cormorants has set up shop.

“Maintaining a bridge is a cost that we have to have,” Beers-Seydel said. “That’s why we’re looking at different measures on working with the birds and getting them to nest someplace else so we can have it that we do what we need to do and they do what they do.”

To some researchers, the

state’s hazing represents an opportunity to reestablish a cormorant colony at East Sand Island. Studies have suggested that, despite the Army Corps’ arguments when the agency was developing a management plan for the birds, the cormorants actually eat fewer salmon and more of other types of fish when they are at the mouth of the river rather than on the bridge.

Dan Roby, a professor emeritus from Oregon State University, spent years on East Sand Island working with the formerly huge Caspian tern colony there and, later, the growing double-crested cormorant colony.

Ahead of the Army Corps’ management plan, he and his research team urged the agency to pursue nonlethal methods, worried about the potential of colony collapse and the dispersal of birds to less desirable locations in the Columbia River estuary. They felt their research and recommendations were ignored.

‘Wards of the state’

Recently, Roby and researchers with Bird Research Northwest approached the state with a recommendation to attract cormorants off the bridge



Lydia Ely/The Astorian
Angela Beers-Seydel, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Transportation, talks to workers below the Astoria Bridge via walkie-talkie.

and back to East Sand Island. They believe it is possible to maintain a smaller colony at the island, solving, as they see it, many people’s problems with the birds.

The Army Corps, which manages East Sand Island, has not shown any interest in luring birds back to the island. In a statement, the agency said it considers the objectives of its management plan successfully met.

The state, however, is looking into management possibilities. The state had previously reached out to the Army Corps about partnering to get the birds off the bridge without any luck.

Over the years, the Army

Corps has not linked the movement of double-crested cormorants farther upriver to management actions on East Sand Island. Instead, the agency points to predation by eagles and gulls as a reason for the cormorants’ departure and continued lack of successful nesting.

Roby predicts that without more active management to restore the abandoned colony on East Sand Island, what remains of the cormorants’ diminished interest in nesting there could disappear.

The terns are also in trouble. Attacked by eagles and other predators and restricted to an acre of nesting habitat under a management plan by

the Army Corps, it appears the East Sand Island terns have not had a single chick survive to the fledgling stage for the last two years.

Roby doesn’t see a future for the birds without people taking on the management work to reduce disturbances and enhance nesting habitat.

“It’s not going to happen on its own,” he said. “We’ve changed the environment so much that these birds, in a sense, have become wards of the state — that they need our help if they’re going to be in the environment with us.”

This story is part of a collaboration between The Astorian and Coast Community Radio.

Legislature: This is the final regular session under Gov. Brown

Continued from Page A1

The session in Salem ended three days before the deadline on Monday. The next regular session will start in January, after the November elections that will produce members from newly redrawn districts.

This is the final regular session for Brown, who will leave office in January after serving almost two full terms.

Brown gave a preview of Future Ready Oregon at the Oregon Business Plan conference in December. The plan emerged as a result of support from business interests and the governor’s Racial Justice Council, which she formed in the aftermath of racial justice protests in 2020.

“As I said in my State of the State address, I am going to use every moment to ensure that these dollars are being implemented in a way to lift up our families that are often left behind,” Brown

said Friday.

“We have an incredible opportunity with Future Ready Oregon to make investments in career training and skills that provide Oregonians with the tools and resources they need to access good-paying careers in every corner of this state and make the most of that opportunity. We have to move quickly. The same is true with housing and child care.”

Brown mentioned a comment by John Tapogna, the president of the Portland firm ECONorthwest, who said that Future Ready Oregon is a good example of how states can spend federal dollars from last year’s American Rescue Plan Act.

Under that \$2 trillion law, which President Joe Biden proposed for recovery from the coronavirus pandemic, Oregon got \$2.6 billion, \$500 million of which will be saved to balance a future state budget. The job plan draws \$123 million from federal funds, matched with

\$76 million from the state’s tax-supported general fund.

Efforts will focus on three economic sectors generating jobs for the next decade — health care, construction and manufacturing — and on many workers who have been left behind in previous economic recoveries. The plan also will provide social support, such as housing, child care and transportation, while workers undergo training.

Once the farmworker overtime bill passed both chambers, Republicans dropped their effort to slow proceedings by having all bills be read aloud before final votes. This constitutional requirement is normally waived.

As record amounts of personal and corporate income taxes roll into state coffers, Brown and lawmakers had a lot of leeway and spent a total of \$1.5 billion beyond what they approved in the two-year state budget.

State House Speaker Dan

Rayfield, a Democrat from Corvallis who presided over his first session, said the leaders of the Legislature’s housing committees and housing advocates focused their attention on proven programs.

“I think it is an amazing package,” he told reporters at a separate virtual event. “I think we are investing in things that have been proven,” such as Project Turnkey, which has resulted in 867 units from 19 conversions of former motels in about 18 months.

A chunk of the \$400 million will go toward operation of shelters and other services and immediate needs.

Rayfield, who became speaker when Democrat Tina Kotek, of Portland, left early to focus on her bid for governor, was most recently the House co-leader of the Legislature’s joint budget committee. He said there are always spending demands that lawmakers have to sort through.

“You have to make the

best decisions you can in the moment for the crises we are seeing in the community,” he said.

Senate President Peter Courtney, a Democrat from Salem, said he is uncertain how much of an effect the money will have on a seemingly intractable issue of homelessness and housing shortages.

“We are throwing money at it,” he said. “We are trying to do things, but it’s a mystery.”

Courtney is wrapping up a record 38 years in the Legislature, including a record two decades as the Senate’s presiding officer. He has said the tougher task is not lawmakers approving money, but state agencies getting it out to where it is needed — and that Oregon had real difficulties with paying out unemployment benefits and emergency rental assistance.

“We have struggled with getting money out,” Courtney said. “The Legislature isn’t the branch that is sup-

posed to implement the laws. But too bad. The Legislature came up with the laws and money, so we’d better find a way to follow this money.”

House Republican leader Vikki Breese-Iverson, of Prineville, said, “Oregonians needed us to tackle our state’s rising cost of living, unchecked crime wave and deteriorating education.

“I am proud of what Republicans accomplished this session to make life better for Oregonians across the state, but Democrats prevented us from accomplishing more. Instead, Democratic leaders blocked our additional efforts to help Oregonians while passing an eye-watering spending plan and harmful legislation we will need to fix next year.

“Our state cannot continue under this failed leadership. It is time for more balance in Salem.”

The Oregon Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.

COLUMBIA RIVER MARITIME MUSEUM

3D Theater • Museum Store • Model Boat Pond

OPEN DAILY 9:30 TO 5:00 • 1792 Marine Drive, Astoria, OR
503.325.2323 • www.crmmm.org

If you're a print subscriber you get digital access FREE

Call 1.800.781.3214
and we can help you get access
to all of The Astorian content on your computer, tablet or phone