

Tribe Builds New Fish Weir In Yamhill River

■ The Natural Resources Department is bringing fish back up the South Yamhill with an unfolding plan that at this time includes the mother of all fish weirs.

By Ron Karten

For the last three years, the Tribal Natural Resources Department has put up temporary fish traps, called weirs, to count the number of steelhead and coho swimming up the south fork of the Yamhill River to spawn. The wire weirs sit in a jumble today beside the Yamhill, watching as the big one is built and soon will work in their stead.

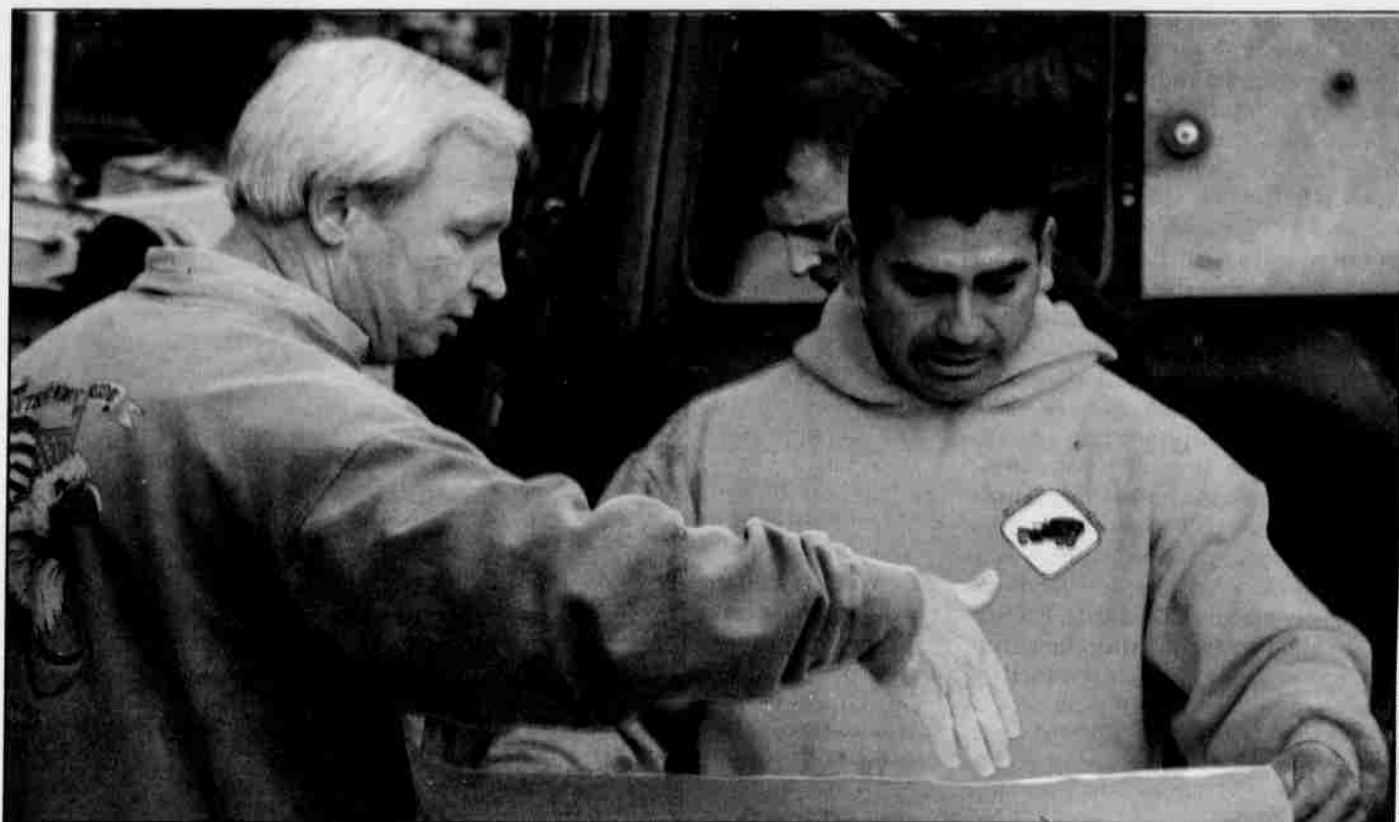
In the old days, the fish were plentiful here, according to Tribal Elders.

Tribal Elder Dean Mercier used to come out to the South Yamhill after school on Fridays and over the weekend would catch enough trout for the neighborhood. In the 1960s, after the state built the fish ladder at Oregon City, he said, steelhead trout started to appear and traveled as far as five miles above the current weir site. That was the first time he'd seen Chinook salmon in the river, too.

Tribal Elder Dale Langley also used to fish the creek regularly. We used to catch cutthroat out of there. In the fall, I know damn well there was steelhead, but we had the old willow pole with the string tied on it, and they'd break the line. I caught one about 18 inches long. I think (Tribal Elder, now passed on) Orville Leno, he caught a couple." Langley is vice chair of the Fish & Wildlife Committee.

Today, the Tribe is involved in a number of efforts to bring the fish back.

One is this effort to build a weir that can withstand the twin challenges of high water and debris flowing down the creek. If successful, it will enable the department to



Tribal Engineer Eric Scott (l) discusses design issues with Herman Zamorra, Construction Foreman for Gelco Construction, the subcontractor responsible for pouring the concrete footing for the fish weir. Tribal Fish & Wildlife Coordinator Kelly Dirksen is in the background.

Photo by Toby McClary

measure the size of the fish, determine the gender and species, said Natural Resources Fish & Wildlife Coordinator Kelly Dirksen.

Tribal staffers will implant transmitters in some fish to track migration above the weir. Seeing where they go "will allow us to target habitat improvement projects," said Dirksen.

The farthest up this fork of the Yamhill that fish have been found is six miles, said Dirksen, to where the west and north forks split.

"They're using more of the creek than we thought."

"The long term goal is "to get catchable steelhead on the reservation," he said. It will require a fish development plan, and along the way, establishment of a hatchery. "The weir will give us information to develop that plan."

Tribal Engineer Eric Scott designed the weir. He included "a pivot on the bottom to allow the weir to adjust to different stages of the

river," he said. The weir also will adjust to catch different fish sizes, and to allow debris that stacks up in the mesh to be cleared away.

Round Valley LLC, the Tribally-owned construction company is the general Contractor on the job, and Gelco Construction is the subcontractor for the concrete pour. In mid-October, the company had diverted the creek with culverts to drain sections where concrete footings would be poured. ■



Tribal member Tim George, with Round Valley Construction, takes some measurements for the next phase of the job.

Photo by Ron Karten