

Fish travel 215 miles to reach fish weir

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salmon at the side of a fire as it leaned on wire stretched between posts. Everybody got a taste before the big meal at the gym.

The cedar plank salmon selected and prepared at Spirit Mountain Casino was "the real deal," said Spirit Mountain Casino Executive Chef Richard Burr. "Line caught wild king," he said.

The celebration comes in late fall or early winter in Grand Ronde, said Bobby Mercier, Culture and Language specialist, because that is when the big run occurs here.

In terms of numbers, he said, Agency Creek represents about 3/1,000th of the Columbia-Wilamette watershed, but gets 4.5 percent of the watershed's Coho salmon run.

After years of habitat work on Agency Creek, said Dirksen, and though numbers go up and down each year depending on ocean conditions and many other factors, the Tribal waterway is bringing back about as many salmon as it can. "We have to be reasonably close to its carrying capacity," he said of Agency Creek.

To accomplish this, Natural Resources staff members over the years have opened 22 miles of stream, added 160 logs, installed 13 new culverts and returned countless fish carcasses to the source.

Fish travel 215 miles from the ocean to reach the fish weir at Agency Creek, Dirksen said, and their chance of survival is about one in 1,250. "Look around you," he said, "if we were among these fish, it is unlikely that any of us would be back again next year."

"It takes a lot of work to keep the area maintained," said Natural Resources Manager Michael Wilson. "Sometimes, in the cold and in the rain, they work at the fish weir all night."

The Tribe won a grant five years ago to build the weir that Natural Resources uses to count, assess, record and mark the fish coming back upstream, all in the service of evaluating fish run numbers, which in turn validate the success of the Tribe's habitat improvement.

Tribal Council came out, all but Chairman Reyn Leno, who was having a medical procedure performed. Giffen welcomed the group at the fish weir with a little historical summary of the Tribe's age-old relationship with salmon. "I hope you leave the ceremony today with a better understanding of how we have been good stewards of the waters," Giffen added.

Tribal Council member Chris Mercier remembers growing up and seeing few fish but many nutria in and around Agency Creek.

Travis Mercier shared fish and other Native stories with staff and guests.

Salmon celebrations give the Tribe an opportunity to say thanks to many state and federal partners for their support, to show off the results of the effort and also to use this teachable moment to show how



Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Kelly Dirksen, right, Tribal Fish and Wildlife program manager, talks about the life stages of Coho salmon and their survival rate during the second annual Salmon Celebration at the Tribal fish weir on Friday, Dec. 7. Holding an informational board of improvement projects the Tribe's Natural Resources Department has done to Agency Creek are Grand Ronde Royalty Princess Amelia Mooney, left, and Little Miss Grand Ronde Kaleigha Simi. Third from left is Lindsay Belonga, Tribal biological technician.

important salmon are to Tribal life, said Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor.

Tribal Council Secretary Toby McClary introduced almost 25 special guests to the celebration, representing the city of St. Helens, Ecotrust, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, Ice Age Floods Institute, the Lower Columbia River Estuary, the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, the offices of Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, the Oregon Department of Forestry, Oregon Live, the Tryon Creek State Natural Area, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, The Sheridan Sun, Spirit Mountain Community Fund, Sybaris Restaurant, the University of Portland, the federal Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service.

Tribal Council member Cheryle A. Kennedy said she remembers when "the fish were bigger than the children. I'm hopeful that we will continue to enjoy the return of fishing and hunting that the Creator gave us. When we can't hunt and fish, that does away with our culture."

Through celebrations like this, the Tribe has been re-kindling a culture. Twenty-nine years mark the time since Restoration, when the Tribe began the long process of restoring federal recognition and clawing back traditional rights. Along the way, the Tribe also began the process of reclaiming the local environment of which this celebration is a part.

"It was clear from the start that Tribal Council and Tribal membership wanted to see the fish restored to Agency Creek," said Dirksen.

With Tribal Council on board, Natural Resources had all the support the department needed, Dirksen said, to improve the habitat and lure the salmon back.

The meal, prepared by Spirit Mountain Casino food and beverage staff, brought back some of the best in traditional foods, including cedar plank salmon, fall mushroom

crusted beef tenderloin, dauphinois potatoes, roasted root vegetables, with rolls and butter, petit fours, cookies and dessert bars.

Bobby Mercier, Brian Krehbiel, Travis Mercier, Izaiiah Fisher, 11, and Susun Fisher, 14, performed a blessing song for the event.

"Last Friday," said Tribal Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor, who led the preparations for the event, "the Tribe celebrated its second annual Salmon Celebration. It may have been a wet and dreary day, but the spirit, generosity, joy and Tribal pride that event demonstrated surpassed any cloudy skies, or damp clothes and feet."

She had many people to thank in a staff-wide e-mail.

"Thank you to Mike Wilson from Natural Resources for his support of the event. Your department came in full force to help and to celebrate. Kelly Dirksen, as always, did a stellar job of telling the story of our fish and the efforts of our Natural Resources crew to protect and improve habitat.

"Thank you to Bobby Mercier, Brian Krehbiel, Cristina Lara and members of the Canoe Family/Grand Ronde Singers for their help with our salmon pit, moving pop-up awnings, building the fire, helping prepare our fish, your beautiful songs, dances and the joy you brought to the day. Thank you Dave

Fullerton for coming to support them.

"Thank you to Halona Butler and all our young Grand Ronde Royalty for your gracious help.

"Thanks to Greg Archuleta and Jordan Mercier for preparing our fish.

"Thank you to Procurement for your assistance in making sure our feast paperwork for the casino was expedited and our salmon delivered. Speaking of feast, thank you to Chef Richard Burr and Shawna B. at Spirit Mountain Casino for your amazing meal and the team of hospitality experts who assisted in serving it.

"Thank you to Wendell Olson and T.J. McKnight in Information Systems for all your technical assistance in the gym.

"Thank you to Tribal Council for your support

of our event and for your attendance and good words. Thanks to Stacia Martin, Mindy Lane and Lauri Smith for helping out with last-minute details.

"Thank you to Travis Mercier for your eloquence, songs and thoughtful job as our emcee.

"Thank you to Esther Stewart and the Education crew for bringing all our little ones over to share their songs as well. They stole the show.

"Lastly, thank you to my incredible team at Public Affairs: Chelsea Clark and Kendra Kuust in particular for your attention to all those last-minute crazy details. No deed was left undone thanks to you. And thank you to George Valdez for his super design work for our invitations, fliers and program. And to Michelle Alaimo for her work in helping assemble photos of natural resources and salmon work past and present.

"Thanks for the help in preparing for the celebration also go to Lisa Archuleta from the Portland office.

"My inbox is full of great comments from our guests who attended the event. My heart is full of gratitude for all you do for this Tribe."

Tribal Council member Jon A. George gave the invocation before the meal. ■

Casino holds annual toy drive

Spirit Mountain Casino is holding its annual Doernbecher Toy Drive that will continue through Monday, Dec. 17.

Participants may bring a new, unwrapped toy to the Coyote Club desk and receive \$10 in free slot play. There is a limit of one toy per visit with a maximum of \$50 per person. Doernbecher's wish list includes rattles, soft musical toys and stacking rings for infants and toddlers; Barbie dolls, action figures, tea sets, washable markers and puzzles for preschool and school-aged children; and console games, art supplies, journals, nail polish kits, DVDs, books and gift cards for teens. Donations will be delivered to Doernbecher Children's Hospital in Portland. For more information, call 503-879-3764 or visit www.spiritmountain.com. ■