

NEWS RELEASE

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COUNTY COMPLETES TWO PROJECTS TO RECOVER SALMON AND REDUCE FLOOD HAZARDS

BELLINGHAM—Whatcom County Public Works, in conjunction with the Whatcom County Flood Control Zone District (FCZD), has completed two projects on the Nooksack River to reduce flooding impacts and provide crucial habitat for endangered Chinook salmon.

“Often people think that a project intended to help fish will make flood problems worse. But the Acme and Canyon Creek projects prove that you can restore salmon habitat and manage flood hazards at the same time,” said Jon Hutchings, Assistant Director of the county Public Works Department.

One project, near the town of Acme, consists of a series of engineered log jams along the west bank of the South Fork Nooksack River upstream from the Highway 9 Bridge. Logs naturally accumulated at this site in the past and, with supplementation by local residents, had kept the riverbank from eroding toward Acme. These jams created pools where returning salmon could rest as they traveled upstream to spawn. The South Fork upstream from Acme is the main spawning ground for a spring Chinook population that is threatened by extinction.

The new log jams have replaced the old, deteriorating ones. Large logs with the roots still attached were anchored to rock ballast along the riverbank. The jams will arrest bank erosion, offering some flood protection to the adjacent properties and for the community of Acme, and will provide salmon protected hiding places in deep pools with cooler water. Trees planted along the bank will provide shade in the future. The new habitat is expected to be used for years to come.

Survey and design was conducted by the team of Wilson Engineering and Northwest Hydraulic Consultants. Construction was managed by Public Works with labor and heavy equipment provided by Haines Tree and Spray, Harkness Contracting, and Kemp West.

The Acme project has had immediate benefits for fish. “We saw juvenile salmon using the structures within hours of placement,” said Christina Schoenfelder, the Whatcom County engineer for the project.

Project design and construction funding was provided by a grant from the Washington State Salmon Recovery Funding Board with match from Whatcom County FCZD and the Acme Van Zandt Flood Control Sub-zone. The construction site will be replanted early next year in cooperation with the Whatcom Conservation District and an inmate crew under Whatcom County Sheriff’s Office supervision.

The second project improves fish passage at a cascade in Canyon Creek on the North Fork Nooksack River, downstream from the community of Glacier. The barrier, a cascade that formed after a levee was installed and bedrock was blasted as part of a flood control project in 1994, blocks 3.9 miles of habitat historically used by salmon, trout, and char, including spring Chinook salmon, steelhead, and bull trout – all listed as “threatened” under the federal Endangered Species Act. Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife data for the last five years show that the cascade has blocked from half to all the spring Chinook moving upstream to spawn. The local salmon recovery plan identified this cascade as the second highest priority barrier to native Chinook salmon in the Nooksack watershed, after the City of Bellingham’s water supply diversion dam on the Middle Fork Nooksack River.

The first phase of lower Canyon Creek restoration occurred over several years, and involved acquisition of parcels from willing landowners using a combination of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Whatcom County FCZD funding, and Washington State Salmon Recovery Funding Board funds. Properties adjacent to the creek in mapped high risk areas of the alluvial fan were prioritized. Whatcom County FCZD and Whatcom Land Trust acquired 26

properties and removed buildings to protect human lives and reduce the potential for future flood damage claims. The acquisitions also opened the door for stream restoration.

In July 2009, Whatcom County Public Works, the FCZD, and Whatcom Land Trust partnered to begin the next phase. Heavy equipment was used to remove the downstream 520 feet of the levee and re-shape the floodplain. This has reconnected Canyon Creek to its floodplain, reducing the pressures that created the cascade. "Winter high flows can now spread out and may even bypass the bedrock falls, creating a clear path for salmon," says John Thompson, a Whatcom County geologist and project manager. Heavy equipment was used to move boulders at the cascade itself as an interim measure. Early Chinook and pink salmon had been blocked by the cascade and were crowding the pool below but are now able to more easily move upstream.

This project also has the potential to reduce flooding in the area. Paula Cooper, Whatcom County River and Flood Division manager, said, "It seems counter-intuitive that removing part of a levee won't make flooding worse, but we were careful to mitigate any increased potential for flooding of the Mount Baker highway." The levee removal gives the stream more room and capacity while swales and an old resort road that channeled water from the project area to the highway were filled. The fill will redirect flood water back toward Canyon Creek and the North Fork.

The Canyon Creek project was designed by Herrera Environmental Consultants. Contractors included Aggregates West, Cascade Clearing, D.L. Sorenson Construction, and Harkness Contracting. The site will be replanted early next year in cooperation with the Whatcom Conservation District and an inmate crew under Whatcom County Sheriff's Office supervision.

Project design and construction funding was provided by grants from the Washington State Salmon Recovery Funding Board with match from the Whatcom County FCZD.

For more information regarding the Acme project, contact Christina Schoenfelder or Paula Cooper, Whatcom County Public Works at (360) 676-6876. For more information regarding Canyon Creek, contact John Thompson or Paula Cooper all can be reached at (360) 676-6876.

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