

Methow Valley News Online

High water, ice dam sends Twisp River onto its floodplain

By John Hanron

If you wanted to watch a river system work the way it is supposed to, the Twisp River was giving a lesson early this week.

After two days of above-freezing temperatures and nearly an inch of rain Sunday (Jan. 16), the Twisp River saw a rapid surge in its flow, rising a foot in the hours after 3 p.m. Then, according to streamflow measurements from the U.S. Geological Society, dropping a foot and a half in just a couple of hours in the early morning Monday (Jan. 17).

As the ice-choked mouth of the river caused water to back up as far upstream as the salmon rearing ponds, more than a half mile above the confluence with the Methow River, the Twisp spread out across its floodplain on the west side of town.

Resident Tom Doran, who has lived near Borchard Lane for 15 years, near the edge of the high ground overlooking the wetlands, said he was startled by the amount of water running through the floodplain Monday.

While the river regularly expands into the low area to some degree every year, he said, this breach seems different to him, with a new channel carrying perhaps half of the flow through the southside wetlands.

"The river is flowing into the meadow, into where it wasn't flowing before," he said. "It's making a new island."

Brian Fisher, a project manager with the Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation, said while the river had used this new channel in the past, it was anybody's guess where the river would end up once the ice melts. He said generally the river would have to either carve out a deeper gouge or transport sediment to change the elevation of various channels.

Chris Johnson, president of MSRF, which manages the salmon ponds and 35 acres of riparian land on both sides of the river just upstream, said the new channel is "significantly higher" than the main channel to the north, and he predicted the river would return to its former route.

Johnson said his group perforated the dike at various elevations between the salmon rearing ponds and the floodplain meadow below Tom Doran's neighborhood in order to encourage the river to use the entire area if it needed.

"We designed for this situation so that it provides some flood protection for the town of Twisp," Johnson said this week. "It did just what it is designed to. For us it's great to see that happen."

He said it was beneficial for the floodplain to get regular doses of high water, and that the area had some weed problems in the past.

"We don't have a fully natural system and it takes quite a bit of management," he pointed out.

Scott Miller, of Okanogan County Emergency Management, said he received no reports of any flooding or damage in the county from the weekend's rain.

Both the Chewuch and the Methow rivers saw a similar spike of high water Sunday and Monday, but all sites were reporting receding levels



by Tuesday, according to USGS data.

Photo by Sue Misao: A slab of ice finds a resting place at the confluence of the Twisp and Methow rivers Monday. Rain and high temperatures spurred a surge in the rivers and a breakup of the ice.

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