

Methow Valley News Online

Agencies team up to improve river, fish habitat on large scale



By Marcy Stamper

Basing restoration projects on the overall functioning of a river system to create healthy rivers and improve habitat for endangered fish is the focus of a new partnership.

The Bureau of Reclamation and the Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation have teamed up with the Yakama Nation Fisheries to restore fish habitat and river function along eight miles of the Methow River. The Bureau and MSRF are working on the northern part of the reach, from Winthrop to Evans Road, and the Yakama biologists are responsible for the river from there to Twisp.

The approach is novel because it encompasses restoration on a broad scale within an entire reach, rather than combining isolated projects. "A reach-based approach is real ambitious and makes more sense because of how different activities interact," said Michael Notaro, landowner outreach coordinator for the upper segment.

To be successful, salmon recovery must be conceived on a larger scale that embraces the overall function of the reach and its tributaries, according to Hans Smith, habitat biologist for the Yakama Nation Fisheries Upper Columbia Habitat Restoration Project. Fish use different parts of the river and upstream areas affect those downstream, both from season to season and over the long term, he said.

"This is an attempt to have a cohesive restoration project in a small window of time for the entire reach," said Smith.

The Middle Methow was chosen after a comprehensive assessment of the Methow sub-basin that recommended priority areas for habitat enhancement, said Notaro. While the primary focus is on habitat for spring Chinook and steelhead, the work supports ecologically functional systems for all species.

Because the majority of the riverfront is in private hands, these projects will require cooperation from landowners. In the past, agencies have initiated river-habitat restoration projects based more on landowner interest and cooperation than on an overall assessment of the river, sometimes even designing a project because a landowner was amenable, said Smith. While this new effort will still necessitate the participation of property owners, it includes considerable outreach to enlist their help.

Landowners have been largely supportive of riverbank restoration projects, which can benefit them by strengthening an eroding bank at no cost to them, but restoration work has occasionally encountered resistance to the overall goal of salmon recovery, said Smith.

The current course of the river is an outcome of simplification over the past century, with the elimination of side channels and removal of floodplain forests and beaver to promote residential and agricultural development. After the large floods in the 1940s and 1970s, riverbanks were stabilized with rip-rap, which accelerates the force of the water, eroding unarmored banks, said Notaro. "There would be lots of downed trees and logs in a normally functioning river system," he said.

Both teams are developing several alternatives. The primary interventions involve the addition of woody debris to the river, opening and enhancing side channels, and increasing the complexity of the main channel. The interventions may also include revegetation of the riverbank.

These steps will help create habitat – high-quality refuge and nutrient supply – for juvenile salmon so they can grow stronger for their trip to the ocean. The anticipated projects would also protect the considerable number of existing spawning grounds, said Smith.

The agencies have been working together closely but on slightly different timelines, in part because of their funding sources, according to Smith. The Bureau of Reclamation and MSRF will have to apply for some funding once projects have been approved. The budget for the northern section is about \$2 million, said Notaro.

The Yakama Nation's restoration projects are already funded through accords between the tribes and dam managers. Their biologists are still developing their alternatives, which they expect to present to the public in March. All proposals will have a formal public comment period under the State Environmental Policy Act.

The agencies plan to do the work from 2012 through 2014, which coincides with an ongoing research project by the U.S. Geological Survey to measure the effects of restoration on salmon.

One of the first steps in choosing an alternative is a presentation to the public. The Bureau and MSRF are hosting an information session on Wednesday, Feb. 9, at 6:30 p.m. at the Twisp Grange. While Yakama Nation biologists will be present, this session will focus on the northern half of the restoration project.

For more information, contact Notaro at (509) 429-2939, or Smith at 996-5005.

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