

Methow Valley News

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Proposal aims to improve fish habitat, river health



By [Marcy Stamper](#)

Anglers, rafters and kayakers, and anyone concerned with the Methow River are encouraged to weigh in on a proposal intended to enhance fish habitat and the health of the river.

The [Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation](#) has submitted an application to Okanogan County for habitat and restoration work on four miles of the Methow River from Winthrop to Evans Road.

The Foundation is considering four alternatives to improve habitat for endangered salmon and other aquatic species, from revegetation of the riparian zone through the addition of large woody debris at key points in the river and removal of nonfunctional structures. The fifth alternative involves leaving the river as is.

As described by MSRF, the different levels of intervention would restore healthy river function and increase the quantity and quality of spawning and rearing habitat for spring Chinook, steelhead and bull trout (all listed as endangered species) by creating pools and opening side channels. The interventions would also benefit Pacific lamprey and other aquatic and terrestrial creatures, according to the proposal.

All alternatives rely on voluntary participation by landowners and public-land managers. The project would assist the [U.S. Bureau of Reclamation](#) and the [Bonneville Power Administration](#) in meeting requirements for recovery of endangered species.

The [Okanogan County Planning Department](#) has issued a preliminary Determination of Significance for the proposal under the state Environmental Policy Act, which will require the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.

"It's a smorgasbord of recovery projects with many different pieces," so planning staff and MSRF have elected to use the EIS as a drafting tool, according to planning director Perry Huston.

Riparian enhancement, the lowest level of intervention, would involve planting native species and removal of invasive ones. MSRF predicts that they would be able to restore only one-quarter to one-half of the 180 acres suited for enhancement, because of financial limitations and lack of full participation by landowners.

Alternatives three through five add more intensive restoration. Alternative three would place 74 wood structures, mainly single logs, in the

main channel and another 72 in side channels. It would also breach a levee.

The next level of construction would add larger wood structures, almost 200 in all, create more wetlands and pools, and remove riprap and a derelict diversion structure. It is intended to create new side channels, eight seasonal and two year-round.

The most extensive construction would install 266 large wood structures in the main and side channels and floodplain. It would create more than 20 acres of wetlands and cool pools fed by groundwater, generating additional habitat and refuge for fish, according to the proposal.

The biological assessment prepared in February for MSRF found vegetation had been cleared for agricultural and residential development in half of the study area. In addition, it found little opportunity for the natural creation of logjams, which slow the river current and reduce erosion. These conditions also keep the river from migrating into natural channels and overly simplify its path.

Risks and benefits of the proposal

MSRF's initial assessment finds risks increase with the extent of the interventions, among them the spread of noxious weeds, potential boating hazards posed by logjams and damage to natural resources. On the other hand, it finds an increased benefit to the health of the river and the fish populations, including increased gravel for spawning, habitat complexity and cover for juveniles, and overall improved functionality of the river and watershed.

While ultimately the projects would be expected to enhance fish habitat, there is the possibility that the construction phase will have short-term negative effects on fish, according to the biological assessment.

Depending on the extent of the work, costs are estimated as follows:

- Engineering and environmental review: \$2 to \$5 million
- Construction: \$3 million for riparian enhancement to \$10 million for the most extensive placement of woody debris and removal of levees
- Land preservation and protection: \$500,000 to \$2 million

Another four-mile stretch south of the proposed project area is being looked at for similar habitat improvements by the [Yakama Nation Fisheries](#) on a slightly different timeline.

MSRF and the county are launching a formal scoping process, in which the public provides input on what issues should be addressed in the EIS. They have scheduled two informational scoping meetings, next Wednesday, April 13, at 6:30 p.m. in the Winthrop Barn (upstairs) and Saturday, April 16, at 11 a.m. in the Twisp Valley Grange.

Scoping comments must be made in writing by May 18 and sent to Perry Huston at phuston@co.okanogan.wa.us. For more information or a copy of the proposal and related documents, call 509 422-7160.

Photo by Mike Maltais

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