

Methow Valley News

Online

Methow River summer projects would improve fish habitat

By Marcy Stamper

Two projects intended to improve salmon habitat in the Methow River by enhancing side channels – adding pools where salmon can rest and removing a levee to restore natural flows – are under review for construction this summer.

The projects, on the west side of the Methow River across from the Methow Valley State Airport, are part of a larger series of restoration efforts being proposed by the Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

The larger of the two projects slated for construction this year is on 55 acres owned by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, where engineers would place woody debris to narrow an existing side channel to improve the functioning of the channel and adjacent floodplain, according to MSRF president Chris Johnson. The other project, owned by MSRF, is a 17-acre parcel along Witte Road.

Because the side channels at both sites have widened to 50 to 60 feet, they have become very shallow, only several inches deep, and too warm to support salmon, said Johnson. Adding wood and vegetation along the banks will cut the width of the channels in half, creating resting pools for small fish, said Johnson.

At the WDFW floodplain site, engineers would also remove a 1,100-foot-long riprap levee on the main river channel to restore more natural flows to the side channel, said Johnson.

The agencies are studying five alternatives, from modest revegetation through complex restoration that includes removing the levee. While the projects would be done over the next six years, they are interrelated and are being reviewed now to assess their overall impact, said Johnson.

The agencies hope to do the first phase of construction in July. There may be additional construction in subsequent years, depending on the extent of the projects approved. The projects are located on public and private land and have received approval from the landowners, said Johnson. They still require permits for work in the river, said Johnson.

Public comments from neighboring property owners submitted on the draft environmental impact statement last year include concerns about weeds, ground disturbance from increased travel on unimproved roads, mosquitoes and changes to the shoreline. One person questioned the risks to river rafters and boaters from more logjams and said she had found the agencies' plans to provide additional funding for search and rescue "alarmingly inadequate."

In response, MSRF said they would follow best practices to avoid bringing in weed seeds and would work with designers to place logjams within lines of sight of boaters to minimize risk. They also eliminated plans for some pools within wetlands to decrease mosquito-breeding areas. The agencies have issued an environmental checklist based on their revised project design, said Johnson.

The estimated cost is \$2.5 million for design, construction and permits, with some additional costs for engineering, said Johnson. The Bureau is handling project design and paying for permits and outreach. Construction will be paid for by the Bonneville Power Administration in conjunction with mitigation for endangered salmon. MSRF is coordinating the projects.

The Okanogan County Planning Department is accepting comments on the proposals and alternatives through April 25. Project information is available on the Planning Department website at www.okanogancounty.org/planning.

For more information or to submit comments, contact natural resource planner Char Schumacher at (509) 422-7090 or cschumacher@co.okanogan.wa.us.

Photo by Mike Maltais: Pat Mills of Methow and Bellingham called it "a perfect day" for steelhead fishing on the Methow River last Thursday morning. Using a feathered jig suspended from a bobber, Mills had already hooked and released a 10-pound native fish before this photo was taken. Projects planned by the Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation



could improve salmon habitat, and maybe lengthen the season. This year, the Methow opened for steelhead fishing March 15 but closed March 25, six days before the scheduled March 31 closure when anglers caught the allotted quota of hatchery steelhead.

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