CREST WORKS TO RESTORE CHINOOK WETLANDS

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CHINOOK — When U.S. Highway 101 was first built, following the railroad tracks leading up to the lighthouse at Fort Columbia, the digging and construction cut off the tide waters from a plain of wetlands at the base of Scarborough Hill. That will soon change.

In an effort to mitigate flooding in the area, Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce (CREST) has undertaken a project to re-establish the tidal flow by excavating a channel and planting a low, dense culture along the bend in the road before the climb.

As board chair, Karon Olson, explained from his office at Chinook’s Sea Resources, “There wasn’t much thought put into how the construction of the old highway might affect the salinor or the wetlands. But this project is a win-win for everybody.”

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CREST: Lowering the culvert should provide better drainage from this area.
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Amy Ammer, habitat restoration specialist for CREST and project manager, said, "This project will reconnect the estuary to tidal flow, help the salmon and, we hope, lessen the danger of flooding in the area around Hoover Street." "Some of these areas don't drain well because they were cut off from the tidal flow. The original culverts were put in too high to take advantage of most tidal drainage," she added.

Common ground

Ammer and Osborne both mention the connection to place as a place of pride and identity for the community and other leaders after a dispute about modifying the tide gates at the mouth of the Chilkoot River. There were serious concerns raised about some aspects of that project.

"We had some initial public hearings held at the Sea Resources classrooms," said Osborne. "And we had some lower level fishermen who got their backs up when they thought the whole Chilkoot River was going to be flooded."

But at Fort Colville wetlands and tidal reconstruction project on the opposite end of CREST is different in that it appears common ground has been found to benefit the goals of all stakeholders, including the fish. The project that will be constructed to a tidal flow of 1,800 acres belonging to State Parks.

As Osborne put it, "I don't see why anything can be wrong with the project because, first of all, the connection to place that was created by building a highway over a railroad trestle without any old-roads going under it was bad planning." "And, second, if CREST didn't help with the funding, Washington State Department of Transportation would have had to close this culvert, which is impossible," he said.

Osborne explained that the WSDOT had a site plan that required them to review all the priority culvert blocks and then design a value that establishes a center of priority. The fact that CREST stepped up to create a partnership meant that the project is happening sooner and with other funds to support it.

"Lowering the culvert should provide better drainage into the wetlands area where it is flooded and provide tidal flow into the area that will allow juvenile salmon to come into the wetlands area and up the river," said Ammer.

Support for salmon

The physiology of juvenile salmon undergoes a transformation from freshwater to saltwater as they move from the lower Columbia River estuary at the mouth of the Chilkoot River. Juvenile salmon must adapt and migrate to make this transition from freshwater to saltwater.

"We are providing a greater area for salmon to migrate and the water will flow more easily," said Osborne. "The project will allow salmon to swim more freely and travel upriver."

"I think this is going to be a tremendous benefit. The salmon have been here for so long, and this will make a big difference," said Ammer.

Support for salmon

The project will also provide support for salmon as they transition from freshwater to saltwater. The new culvert will be 12 feet in diameter and will be set in an average low flow rate of two feet. Since a concrete culvert is not the best material for salmon to move through, it will be backfilled with three or four feet of gravel, roughly in a "V" shape, so that it will function more like a natural stream.

"The lowered culvert will help the salmon swim more easily and into the tidal area for most of the salmon," said Ammer. "Also when the Chilkoot River is running high and water flows into that area, instead of sitting in a pool, the culvert will allow the water to flow out."

"What this means is that over time the area, which is now primarily freshwater, will transition from salt water to freshwater," said Osborne. "The process takes time, but the change is already in place.

Traffic restrictions

Traffic will be restricted during parts of it.

"We have traffic restrictions in place with the community," said Osborne. "We'll have one lane closed during day shifts, but those hours are shorter in winter months, so it may be less impact."

"We'll start the project phase 1 in the fall, and we'll go on for about two months," she added. "TheSexyweek"

Monitoring for success

"We're looking for signs of success," said Osborne. "The WSDOT has been very good about monitoring and having ongoing discussions about how things are done. We're anticipating that the lower culvert will improve things, and we're confident that the new plan will work.

"We hope to see salmon back in the area," she said. "We're thankful that the project is going to proceed. It's a really important project because it's going to improve the fish habitat and the overall health of the ecosystem."