

Methow Valley News

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River project should provide year-round pools for fish

By Marcy Stamper

For fish that measure just fractions of an inch – or even a few inches long – being shocked, scooped up in a net, and deposited in a bucket cannot be anything but unnerving. But these indignities are actually providing a new lease on life for several hundred juvenile steelhead, spring Chinook and coho salmon.

The fish, which found their way into isolated pools in a side channel to the Methow River, are being transferred to the main part of the river, where they at least have a chance at survival.

The seven pools, fed by the river during high flows from mid-April through July, become cut off from the main river each year. Most of the pools dry up completely before the end of the summer, according to Brian Fisher, program manager for the Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation. “The fish are basically trapped,” he said.



Fisher and half a dozen colleagues from MSRF and the U.S. Geological Survey began removing the fish from the pools this week in preparation for a restoration project that will create a year-round connection between the Whitefish Island side channel and the Methow River.

MSRF and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation plan to install 26 engineered logjams and other wood structures that will help narrow and deepen the channel, creating permanent quiet, cool pools with good hiding places for young fish.

The fish are lured into the quiet pools during high flows, but many don't make it back out, since the downstream connection to the river dries up for eight or nine months each year, said Fish. Any larger fish they catch will be tagged so their progress can be tracked.

Many of the salmonids they have found are wild fish and all are protected by the Endangered Species Act, said Fisher. The spring Chinook are typically under one year and the steelhead are between one and two years old and have yet to travel to the ocean. The group has also been transferring larval suckers and dace that hatched only a few weeks ago.

The project is designed to improve the complexity of the habitat at Whitefish Island, which has become simplified as a result of various approaches to river management over the past century, said Fisher. “We're not treating a site-specific problem, but treating something on a bigger scale with the opportunities we have,” he said.

The side channel initially formed after the 1948 flood. It is not clear from historical photos if it has always become isolated from the main river during low flows, said Fisher.

In addition to the logjams that will divert the river flow, the project will install a woven wooden crib structure at the base of a steep, erodable slope just below Highway 20. They will also plant willows and riparian vegetation to help secure the hillside.

The channel is a few miles south of Winthrop off Witte Road. Construction is expected to start next week and to be completed in the fall.

The project is a partnership between MSRF and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation on land owned by MSRF. Construction costs are about \$750,000. Because engineering and design were done in conjunction with other projects, it is difficult to assign a total cost to the Whitefish Island restoration, according to MSRF president Chris Johnson.

Photo by Marcy Stamper: MSRF project manager Brian Fisher, left foreground, U.S. Geological Survey fish biologist Wes Tibbits, second from left, and others lunge for tiny fish in one of the isolated pools on a side channel to the Methow River.

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