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Agencies, landowners team up for river projects



By Marcy Stamper

An emerging partnership between a utility company, non-profits devoted to fish and river health, government agencies and private citizens may help enhance river channels and protect private land from flooding.

A number of river projects will be done under contract with the Bonneville Power Administration, as part of its mitigation for Columbia River dams, according to Paula Mackrow, outreach coordinator for the Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation, which is coordinating the projects and permitting.

MSRF sees these projects as a way to provide complexity and quality habitat in the upper reaches of the rivers. The organization is currently chaperoning two interventions on the Methow River near Wolf Creek, adding logs with root wads and rocks to shore up eroding riverbanks and increase the complexity of the river flow.

Between natural events that caused logjams and an Army Corps of Engineers project that straightened the river after severe flooding in 1972, water currents in some parts of the river are too strong, increasing erosion of riverbanks, according to Chris Johnson, president of the MSRF.

The non-profit foundation worked with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation on a scientific assessment of the Methow, Twisp and Chewuch rivers in 2006 and identified 72 projects that could help restore properly functioning river conditions, said Johnson. Ranking the projects by biological benefit, economic feasibility and landowner acceptance, they selected a dozen projects to submit for the BPA funding, he said.

Because state law provides an exemption for property owners to protect a single-family residence with riprap or bulkheads, particularly in an emergency situation, MSRF saw an opportunity to save the landowners money and increase protection for the riverbanks and fish, said Johnson. "Complexity grant projects have been designed to assist landowners to do the right thing, as opposed to riprap," he said.

The two bank-stabilization and complexity projects currently planned on the Methow River are on private properties belonging to Al Green and Ken Sletten. Green has lost about 100 feet of his property over the past five years and Sletten has lost about 30 feet since 1992, according to Mackrow.

The projects have almost all the required permits, with the last step being the Joint Aquatic Resources Permit Application, filed by MSRF with Okanogan County on behalf of Green and Sletten earlier this month. Grouping the projects enabled MSRF to streamline environmental and cultural reviews and permits from state and federal agencies, said Johnson.

At Sletten's property, two efforts to stabilize the bank with engineered rock barbs and woody debris in the 1990s have partially failed. Significant erosion is evident under collapsed trees and roots on the sandy bank and riparian vegetation has been lost. Two

3,650-pound concrete ecology blocks chained together that once anchored logs now sit on a jumble of driftwood.

Sletten's home site sits on a high bank about 30 feet above the river, but there is concern that could be compromised if the lower bank erodes, said Johnson.

Sletten had already submitted an application to riprap the exposed areas, according to the JARPA application. The revised plan, after design input from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, will augment the existing barbs with new logs and reposition large rocks to deflect the water flow.

Sletten worked with U.S. Fish and Wildlife and obtained permits on his own in the 1990s, but he said the permitting process had become more cumbersome.

"I had visions of an ever-descending permitting nightmare," said Sletten. "These are minor repairs to existing projects, and I was concerned the damage could increase exponentially" without a permit in time to do the repairs before next spring's high water, he said. Sletten credited Johnson and staffers at WDFW and the Upper Columbia Salmon Recovery Board for helping coordinate and expedite the permits.

Al Green, whose property is several miles downstream from Sletten's, has watched over two decades as the river shifted course to occupy a new channel in front of his property. It had previously flowed hundreds of feet away on the other side of an island. Green's house, which was 200 feet from the river when he built it 20 years ago, is now only half that distance from the water's edge.

Work on the riverbank on Green's property will incorporate logs with root balls weighed down with rock, supplementing wood barbs placed a few years ago, said Johnson.

Another concept BPA has agreed to fund would be to purchase conservation easements to help homeowners pay to move houses away from the river where valuable fish habitat is threatened. MSRF is currently exploring the possibility of facilitating negotiations with landowners for these types of habitat-improvement partnerships, said Mackrow.

BPA and MSRF had about \$300,000 in annual contracts for 2007-09 for complexity projects, said Johnson.

The two bank-stabilization projects are estimated to cost about \$15,000 each, including labor and materials, according to the applications. Several permits from state agencies are still pending. The work will probably be done in September, according to the applications.

Photo by Marcy Stamper

Mazama landowner Ken Sletten will be working with the non-profit Methow Salmon Recovery Foundation to beef up his Methow River shoreline while improving habitat for fish.

Date: 08-19-2009 | **Volume:** 107 | **Issue:** 14