

## Revised Willapa River estuary plans headed for review and comment

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After two years of planning and study, state and federal agencies are seeking permits to restore a portion of the Willapa River estuary near South Bend for the purpose of improving habitat for fish and wildlife and expanding opportunities for outdoor recreation.

In permit applications delivered to the Pacific County Department of Community Development and other permitting authorities this week, project sponsors seek approval to begin work on the revised restoration plan next spring and continue through summer of 2006. Permit applicants include Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Ducks Unlimited.

"This proposal is a scaled-down version of the plan we discussed with area residents last year," said Sue Patnude, WDFW regional director. The current plan still includes tremendous benefits for fish and wildlife, but now incorporates many of the ideas and concerns we heard from area residents. We will continue that dialogue throughout the permitting process.

The public will have opportunities to comment on the revised restoration proposal later this summer as part of the permit-review process. County permits needed to proceed with the project include those for floodplain management, conditional use and critical areas. Others include state hydraulics, wetlands and water quality permits.

As currently proposed, the project would turn 300 acres of pastureland owned by WDFW back to estuarine habitat by removing two miles of dikes along the Willapa River. Another 100 acres of wetlands on the upland side of U.S. Highway 101 would be re-contoured to improve habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife.

As part of the project, a 1½-mile section of U.S. Highway 101 that crosses the property about one mile south of South Bend would be raised three feet before any dikes are removed. Two cross-dikes would also be constructed to protect neighboring properties at high tide.

Project partners reduced the size of the estuary restoration by 100 acres in response to concerns expressed by neighboring landowners, Patnude said.

Colin Newell, WSDOT assistant area engineer, said the roadwork could be completed in 2005, without the need to close both lanes at the same time.

"We will work with local residents to identify a construction schedule that minimizes traffic disruptions," Newell said. "For example, we will avoid closing any lanes Friday afternoons, Saturdays or Sundays, when the tourist traffic is heaviest."

Newell said one benefit of the project is that WSDOT could raise the section of the highway above the 100-year-flood mark and bring it up to current safety and stormwater standards. Plans also include a highway pull-off with parking.

The total estimated cost of the proposed restoration project is \$5.9 million, including \$2.9 million from WSDOT, \$2.7 million from the Corps of Engineers and \$290,000 from the NRCS, a division of the U.S.

Agriculture Department.

Planning for the project began in 1999, when two area ranchers approached NRCS about selling easements to their land around Potter Slough under the national Wetlands Reserve Program. WDFW purchased title to one of those properties, plus three smaller parcels, near the mouth of the Willapa River the following year.

Historical records indicate that diking and dredging activities have destroyed 99 percent of all tidal wetlands in the vicinity of South Bend. By restoring part of the estuary, the project will benefit several species of salmon (chinook, coho and chum), steelhead, cutthroat trout, marine fish, waterfowl and other wildlife, said Curtis Tanner, a biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

"Tidal estuaries provide critical rearing grounds for juvenile salmon, along with habitat for a wide variety of other fish, birds and wildlife," said Tanner, whose agency helped meet the cost of acquiring lands around Potter Slough. "This project would help restore an important part of what's been lost in Willapa Bay."

In addition, the proposed project would open up several hundred acres of shoreline near South Bend for outdoor recreation, Patnude said.

"The project area could become a real draw for bird-watchers, hunters and anglers inclined to buy lunch in town and stay a night or two in a motel," Patnude said. "We've certainly seen other wildlife areas become an engine for economic development. It could happen here, too."

Additional information on the proposed restoration project can be found [here](#)