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Horsetail Creek Floodplain Restoration Project improves connection with the Columbia River

In mid-July, the Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership, U.S. Forest Service, and partners begin construction of fish passage and salmon habitat improvements within the historic Columbia River floodplain. Travelers in the Columbia River Gorge may notice construction crews, heavy equipment, and helicopters working in the vicinity of Horsetail and Oneonta Creeks, five miles west of the Bonneville Dam, for up to two months.

The Horsetail Creek Floodplain Restoration Project improves connectivity between the Columbia River and a 180 acre tract of its floodplain, as well as improving habitat and water quality within this off-channel area. Historically this site was a dynamic part of the Columbia River floodplain with an ash forest, willow bottoms, and five creeks and sloughs connecting to the river. The area had critical feeding and resting habitat for salmon and other fish and wildlife. The construction of Interstate-84 (I-84), the railroad and the clearing of the site's forest to make room for grazing cattle diminished its connection to the river and degraded habitat for salmon and other species. Without this critical habitat the ecosystem suffers; 32 plants, fish and wildlife that use the lower Columbia River are threatened or endangered.

"This is a unique opportunity to work with diverse partners to restore floodplain habitat and reduce the water temperatures to benefit migrating salmon," said Debrah Marriott, Estuary Partnership Executive Director. "Water temperatures in the Columbia River are too warm for salmon during summer and early fall. Bringing back this habitat with cooler water for them to rest during migration will help improve survival. This is one of the last areas for salmon to rest and feed before they travel through the Portland metro area where habitat diminishes greatly."

Coho, steelhead, and Chinook (including stocks from eastern Oregon, Washington, and Idaho), as well as red-legged frogs, great blue heron and other wildlife currently use the site. However, juvenile salmon can only access the site when water levels in the Columbia River are high, typically during April, May and June. Juvenile salmon can also get trapped when water levels recede. The project will retrofit the culvert that passes under I-84 to make it easier for salmon and lamprey to access the site. In addition, to improve water quality and reduce consumption of salmonids by bass and other non-native predators, work will eliminate the diversion of Oneonta Creek and convert a gravel pond to wetland habitat. The project also will improve habitat by removing invasive species, planting native trees and shrubs, and placing large logs and root wads in the streams and wetlands.

"Habitat will be restored for a variety of plant and animal species through this successful cooperative effort between a diverse group of partners," said Lynn Burditt, Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Manager. "This project reflects the outcomes that can be generated when federal, state, and private partners join together."

The Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership is managing the project, which is a collaborative effort with the landowner (the U.S. Forest Service) and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). Project funders include the U.S. Forest Service, Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, Bonneville Power Administration, East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District, Oregon Community Foundation, and ODOT. Inter-Fluve Inc. is providing design and engineering services. Aquatic Contracting, Inc. is constructing the project.

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