

## Restoration work aims to improve salmon habitat

### A new culvert at Hungry Harbor

By **KATIE FRANKOWICZ**

*The Astorian*

The final piece of a three-part effort to improve salmon passage and habitat in the lower Columbia River is underway at Washington state's Hungry Harbor not far from Astoria.

The project, led by the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce, will remove a failing culvert and reopen the habitat beyond to tidal influence and — importantly — salmon.

The project involves partnerships and cooperation between local, state and federal groups and took several years to launch. Funding for the estimated \$1.4 million project is secured, but the work begins at a time when there is some uncertainty for how such projects will be funded in the future as the coronavirus pandemic continues.

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, funded in part by Oregon Lottery dollars, saw a significant hit to video lottery revenue after bars and restaurants closed or were forced to change operations due to the pandemic. The board is a major resource for grants for habitat restoration work of all kinds. In June, the board approved a \$2.1 million grant to the North Coast Land Conservancy for the Rainforest Reserve project.

But with an anticipated decline in lottery revenue because of the coronavirus, the board proposed a 20% reduction for its 2021-2023 budget and has delayed acceptance of the next round of grant applications until the spring.

Some organizations could experience funding gaps as a result and the future of some work may be on shaky ground.

The dip in lottery money also impacts the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department which faces a \$22 million *See Restoration, Page A6*



**The Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce will remove a crumbling culvert to improve salmon passage and habitat at Hungry Harbor beneath State Route 401 along the Washington state side of the Columbia River.**

Photos by Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian



**Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce workers clear debris as they begin to restore the creek habitat.**

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**Restoration:** ‘Outlook for projects in the next couple years is not looking good’

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budget deficit between now and next June. The deficit is tied in part to the decline in lottery funds, but also the revenue parks lost when they closed in early spring due to the pandemic. Many popular park sites on the coast did not reopen until June.

The department held off hiring some of the seasonal workers usually employed during the busy summer months and was forced to cut staff and programs. Some species monitoring and other work was left undone as remaining staff shouldered a wide range of duties when parks reopened.

All in all, Jason Smith, the habitat restoration project manager with the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce, is grateful the project at Hungry Harbor was already guaranteed.

“The outlook for projects in the next couple years is not looking good,” he said.

Money for the Hungry Harbor project came from a variety of sources, including state and federal grants. Donations and support also came from the upstream landowners and the timber company GreenWood Resources, which owns large acreages in Clatsop County.

### **Shallow scoop**

Washington’s Hungry Harbor, a shallow scoop along State Route 401, is best known now as the final resting place of the former U.S. Navy ship the USS Plainview, which rests — in plain view — on the mudflats.

The old culvert at Hungry Harbor — crumpled, silted in and undersized for fish passage — created a barrier to fish and disrupted the natural flow of the tides to the habitat on the other side of the highway, affecting the distribution of sediment, nutrients and natural debris.

The much larger and wider box culvert will allow the unnamed creek that flows through the area to reestablish along historic lines. Though complicated to organize and design, this type of project is the cheapest and most effective option to reopen the habitat to salmon, Smith said.

### **‘Muddy mess’**

The task force completed similar restoration work near Fort Columbia State Park farther to the west in 2010 and at Megler Creek near the Dismal Nitch rest area in 2017, both on the same highway. At Fort Columbia, allowing natural systems to reassert themselves helped alleviate some flooding issues nearby residents had experienced for years.

The change on the land was dramatic. Pushed and pulled with the tides, a stream at Fort Columbia twisted and twined.

Crews will help some of these changes along at Hungry Harbor and plant native species that thrive in a mixed salt and freshwater environment. The site will look like a “muddy mess” for a bit, Smith said, but the simple reintroduction of tides and full stream flow will begin to have an impact almost immediately, reshaping the environment.

In combination with other sites, including Fort Columbia and the Megler Creek area where the task force completed similar culvert replacement and habitat enhancement work, the Hungry Harbor area is an important spot for young oceanbound salmon as well as a returning adults.

Research by state and federal agencies has shown that, on their journey down the Columbia River to the ocean, juvenile salmon cross the river when they reach Tongue Point in Astoria and head toward the Washington shoreline.

“Where they are greeted with around 8 miles of continuous highway,” Smith said.

Drivers can see hints of the habitat salmon would prefer to access on the north side of the Washington state highway: streams that cut down through the forested hillsides. But on the river side of the highway, there are narrow culverts, rock armoring placed by the road department years ago.

The estuary is an important place for salmon of all ages, providing forage and shelter. But this portion of the river is also where young salmon undergo key physical changes that prepare them for the years they will spend at sea. Their ability to access good habitat here can have a direct impact on their ability to survive in the much rougher environment of the Pacific Ocean, Smith said.

Work began on the roadway above the harbor on Oct. 19. Travelers will encounter lane closures in the area through mid-December as crews remove a failed culvert and replace it with a box culvert.

At the other restoration sites, salmon returned quickly — the icing on the cake for people who monitored the areas afterward. Also, Smith noted, an unimpeded creek and a more natural system will benefit other creatures in the estuary, both on the land and in the water.



**The project at Hungry Harbor will create a much larger passage for salmon beneath State Route 401 and will allow the unnamed creek to flow along its natural path.**

Hailey Hoeman/The Astorian