

Eastside Journal Saturday, January 29, 2000

OPINION

Government needs to cooperate with public to save salmon

Last June, some notable politicians -- including Gov. Gary Locke, U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, and Congressman Jack Metcalf -- gathered with environmentalists, Native Americans and others in a quiet farmland setting, at a bend of the Skykomish River, near Monroe.

Reporters and camera crews recorded their words of joy and praise for a project there that is providing life-giving habitat to thousands of young salmon -- the so-called Haskell Slough project.

Beside a shaded pool teeming with tiny salmon fry, Gov. Locke called it "a success story, a celebration of wild salmon swimming in Haskell Slough for the first time in some 50 years!" Looking on, with a smile, was the landowner-farmer, Dale Reiner.

Locke noted the salmon restoration project could be a model for our state in its struggle to cope with the dire implications of its many salmon runs listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Today -- eight months later -- things have changed. For the worse. Reiner's brow is furrowed with worry: The "success story" of the young salmon now appears to be diving toward probable tragedy, thanks to some bureaucrats.

Reiner's 300 or so acres of farmland lie within a sweeping bend of the Skykomish. He and brother Al Reiner are fifth-generation farmers on the land. Through the ages, the river has flooded and changed course many times. In 1941, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built a flood-prevention dike at the north edge of Reiner's property. But floods would recur around the dike.

In the early 1990s, Reiner invested more than \$300,000 in upgrading and contouring some of his land in the river's bend, with the understanding that Snohomish County would help create a protecting berm, extending from the dike. The berm never happened. Then floods in 1995 and '96 surged over the riverbank -- where the berm would have been. Rushing floodwaters scoured and ruined much of the farm's landscape.

Reiner kept his farm going. Eventually an idea was presented to him by John Sayre, executive director of Northwest Chinook Recovery. Sayre has been a leader in (sic) the much-praised "Save The Kings" program and other efforts to restore and protect salmon habitat in Washington. By becoming involved in salmon habitat, recalls Reiner, it looked like "we could get help on the river."

So the farmer, working with the salmon group and others began the "Haskell Slough project." Across the neck of land in the river's bend, were a series of unconnected ponds and marshlands -- remnants of earlier floods, places where salmon were left to die when high water receded.

Funded by some government and private grants, helped by expert fisheries advice and volunteer labor, the work went forward, overseen by Northwest Chinook Recovery. Result: A winding, 3 1/2-mile-long, vegetation-edged waterway that fish -- residents or migrants -- can enter at either end and find safe habitat. Experts agreed the slough can not only bolster the population of coho, but also Chinook and steelhead.

But Haskell Slough remains on dangerous ground. County and state agencies have blocked construction of the needed protective berm. Their apparent reasoning: It's best for salmon if rivers are left to flow unchecked. So that future flood, when -- not if -- it occurs, will again surge out of the Skykomish riverbed and rush across Reiner's land, scouring, erasing all the work that has been done.

Sayre, Reiner and others involved in the project explain the berm wouldn't prevent flooding: It would alter the flood behavior, slowing water movement, preventing the scouring damage to the landscape. The opposition, says Reiner, comes from "mid-level bureaucrats ... who want to ride over everybody."

This week, more visitors toured the project, including Sayre, now leading an organization, "People for Salmon," a group with a diverse membership statewide that works for cooperation between government and landowners.

Also involved was Chris Bayley, the Seattle attorney who leads the Resource Action Council, a group that works to encourage conservation efforts by private landowners. To be successful, salmon-recovery efforts in our state need the involvement of farmers and other private-property owners, noted Bayley. That means there must be trust and a working relationship between landowner with government. Usually that doesn't happen.

Indeed, many of Reiner's friends and neighbors, on nearby farmlands, watch what's happening on Haskell Slough: They probably gloomily conclude that government can never be trusted as a partner.

Last June, Sayre promised the governor his organization would monitor events at Haskell Slough and keep the governor's office informed. He'll have to deal with the question someone raised: "Has the window of cooperation (between landowner and government) been slammed shut?"

Sayre, Bayley and others began working on strategies to keep that window of cooperation open -- not just to rescue the Haskell Slough project but to give some hope to tens of thousands of Endangered Species actions in nearly three-fourths of Washington State in the months ahead.

Richard W. Larsen's column appears occasionally in the Journal. Readers may contact him via the Internet at dicklrns@aol.com