

CLARK-SKAMANIA FLYFISHERS

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Save A Natural Resource – Release All Wild Fish

Oct. 5, 2020

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Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership

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Paul and Keith:

Thanks for inviting Clark-Skamania Flyfishers to participate in the Ridgefield Pits Technical Oversite Group.

Clark-Skamania Flyfishers enthusiastically supports Scenario 3, Full Floodplain and Pit Re-grade.

In general, the 250-members of Clark-Skamania urge designers to focus outcomes of the design, not the difficulty of the effort. It will no doubt be costly to move infrastructure, fill mine pits, address flow, install complexity and replant revegetation, but this is the scenario that will offer the highest return for the dollar over the long term. We agree with comments by the Columbia Land Trust: “We should not let initial costs limit our thinking or the preferred option.”

What follows is a detailed discussion of the restoration plan and endorsement of Scenario 3 in light of details the working group gathered over the past 2 years.

First, Clark-Skamania members believe that to be effective, the restoration needs to be ambitious and address both the immediate pits area and the reach from Day Break Park to the Powerline Hole. Addressing problems with bank erosion, and channel avulsion in that stretch of river isn’t possible until problems at the pits are addressed. But for the pits to become a healthy part of the river again the work plan needs to look ahead to fixing problems such as erosion downstream of Daybreak Park, degradation of cold-water tributaries such as Manley Creek and mass wasting of where Mill Creek flows into the East Fork and the dramatic water removals from Mill Creek, especially late in the summer. In the three decades since the East Fork channel avulsed into the vacant gravel pits, the river has come to pieces. Restoring the pits is the first of many pieces that need to be put back together.

Second: Clark-Skamania believes the design should rely on natural processes to accomplish the objectives.  This is particularly true when factoring in climate change.  Clark-Skamania does not support use of pipe infrastructure to capture and deliver cold water to support salmonid habitat. Natural flows of springs and tributaries need to be preserved and enhanced. Relocation of the channel to capture natural sources of cold water should be a leading objective as the group enters the design phase. Preserving all sources of cold water, such as the springs at the source of Manley and Mill creeks, should be part of the planning. Cold water is essential for returning the area to viable salmonoid habitat and removing invasive species. Consolidating historic sources of cold water back into the channel needs to be a design priority.

Clark-Skamania supports Scenario 3 – Filling and re-conturing the channel is reasonable and perhaps the only alternative that holds hope of restoring the area for the long term. During a 2019 working group meeting we reviewed photos and maps of the area. In that presentation we learned operators, including Clark County, used drag line dredges to haul gravel into heaps for loading and hauling. The process raised islands while lowering the floodplain. Post WW II that gave way to deep-pit excavation. The methods combined over nearly a century of mining lowered the ELEVATION of the channel and floodplain. To try and restore the East Fork by perching a new channel on the edge of a withering floodplain would be bound to fail. The filling and re-counturing proposed in Scenario 3 is the long-term solution.

Clark-Skamania does not support Scenario 3A. It proposes to retain pits 8 and 9 and their cold water as thermal refuges, which means less cold water for the main channel and the network of braided channels to the southwest. One of the goals of Scenario 3 is to create braided channels that can support a variety of species. Coho and chum in lower velocity channels, chinook and steelhead in faster water. Juveniles would utilize all areas, especially those with woody debris and deep holes. But all four species need cold water, so isolating the cold water inputs to pits 8 and 9 from the broader floodplain restoration works against the diversity of habitat that the plan is aimed at achieving. Also, the work group heard from WDFW, Ecology and others that the number of pools per river mile is one measure of a properly functioning alluvial river. Leaving pits 8 and 9 out of the re-design would remove two of the best performing pools on the floodplain outside the re-contoured river channel. That doesn’t make sense. For those reasons, Clark-Skamania opposes Scenario 3A. It might save money, but it doesn’t deliver the best long-term outcome.

Clark-Skamania views Scenarios 4, 5 and 6 as compliments to Scenario 3, not alternatives.

Reconstructing side channels as proposed in Scenario 4 would create habitat upriver and around the pits. It would offer benefits to juveniles moving downriver, but do nothing for upriver spawning populations.

Installing wood jams and excavating where Manley and Mill creeks flow into the East Fork as proposed in Scenario 5 might create scouring flows that would carry away silt that is diminishing the contribution of those vital tributaries. But it wouldn’t stop the wasting away of the high bank downriver. Only moving the channel would accomplish that.

Widening the river at the confluence of Manley and Mill creeks as proposed in Scenario 6 might reduce the wasting of the downstream river bank and create scouring flows to improve the contribution of both tributaries. But the scenario doesn’t address the pits themselves. It’s a small-bore solution for an area with such large problems.

Relocating the channel to the pre-1996 location in Scenario 2 isn’t supported by any of the evidence the work group reviewed. Without significant re-conturing it’s not a lasting solution.

Leaving the river as is and waiting until 2080 for natural processes to fill the pits as proposed in Scenario 1 is basically the path we’ve been on for two decades. Additional insults to the river like silting at the confluence of Manley and Mill creeks, increase in invasive species and warming flows throughout the area that make it a desert for migrating smolt will diminish the salmon and steelhead recovery that we’re all working on. If we choose Scenario 1, we’ve wasted two years of study and have no way forward.

Specific comments:

* Clark-Skamania believes design should focus on the pits while the plan should extend from the Powerline Crossing upriver to the Daybreak Park area. Anyone who fishes this area knows the reach from the Powerline Hole to Daybreak is prime holding water. It’s pre-spawn holding water for coho, Chinook and chum. It is a thermal refuge for upriver steelhead and rearing habitat for all downriver smolt.
* The goal of 50% vegetation cover (Goal 2, objective 2c, page 10) is too low. Clark-Skamania believes the design needs to achieve much higher cover. During the April 2019 work group meeting, the Washington Department of Ecology explained it was working to address high water temperatures and fecal coliform bacteria problems in the East Fork, both above and below the project area. Ecology assessments showed poor riparian conditions and little shade in the lower river including the project reach. Given Ecology’s focus on that problem, this work plan needs to reach for more than 50% vegetation cover and could turn to Ecology for funding to achieve that.
* Clark-Skamania disagrees with comments about reducing costs by allowing vegetation to recover naturally before planting. That’s risky. Difficult species such as knotweed, blackberry, canary ryegrass, butterfly bush and others may cost more to remove than if all habitat was planted. There is an army of volunteer workers, Clark-Skamania members included, that could help plant 100% of the area.
* The design should make control of the wasting hillside downstream of the confluence of Manley and Mill creeks a primary concern after pit re-conturing. The working group heard often that erosion of that cliff was the major source of sediment that was compromising downstream holding pools and thermal refuges. In 2008, residents led by Bruce Wiseman lobbied for and were granted state funds for in-stream structures to halt the erosion and save their homes at the top of that hill. It failed. If the Estuary Partnership launches a multi-million rehab of the area that doesn’t include and explain how the restoration will help address that hillside erosion it risks political backlash and only partial success for restoring the pits.

Steve Jones

Conservation Director

