



Restoration project gets thumbs up from farmers

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A wetlands and habitat restoration project on farmland along the Skykomish River near Monroe, Wash., has won approval from state, local and federal agencies.

Unlike past restoration projects that have provoked opposition from farmers for taking farmland out of production, this one has also won a thumbs-up from farmers in the immediate area.

"What's different about this one is that it benefits agriculture because it will reduce flooding on farmland," said beef rancher and Christmas tree grower Dale Reiner.

In the past, Reiner has publicly blasted wetlands restoration and banking projects that fail to consider a project's effects on agriculture.

The 172-acre habitat mitigation bank site is situated along the Skykomish River approximately 2.5 river miles upstream of the confluence of the Snoqualmie and Snohomish Rivers.

Over a 10-year period, the bank will provide approximately 113 "credits" available to eligible developers and public agencies to mitigate for wetlands they unavoidably destroy as part of a project.

Although it's too early to know what the credits in this bank will sell for, a nearby wetlands mitigation bank is currently selling credits for \$150,000 to \$180,000 per credit.

A credit is generally equal to 1-acre wetlands in the same area that has been destroyed by development or road construction, for example.

To be done in two phases, the project involves breaching part of the county-owned dike system, creating and restoring several small stream channels that connect with the Skykomish River, removing current land uses, extensive regrading and planting the site with appropriate native species.

This, in turn, will allow the river to move and interact freely with a network of changing side channels and a large floodplain wetland area.

The land in the mitigation bank is owned by Steve Davison, who lives on the site, and King County farmer David Remlinger.

In recent years, the land had been used for soccer fields, a dirt bike track and corporate picnic grounds. Prior to that, it had been used for dairy and beef production.

Skykomish Habitat LLC, a private entity formed in 2002 with local landowners and a team of mitigation banking and other experts, developed the concept and gained approvals for the bank.

Final approval of the bank represents the culmination of four years of intense technical and regulatory review to establish the conditions for the establishment and use of the bank.

It also represents a significant investment - "several millions of dollars of frontloaded costs before we see anything," said project manager Eric Gleason.

Gleason said the dike that will be partially breached was originally a road leading to a ferry that went across the river. As time went on, it helped protect a 179-acre dairy farm from flooding. But after the county repaired a section that had been blown out by a flood in the early 1990s - making it 2 feet higher than its original height in the process - it began forcing floodwaters onto nearby farmland.

For property owner Steve Davison, who is also one of Skykomish Habitat's principals, the project is a winning combination for fish, wildlife and agriculture.

"There aren't many opportunities where you can take down a dike without impacting surrounding farms," he said. "Unlike a lot of other wetland projects that eliminate farmland, this project actually provides a real benefit to nearby farms by providing flood relief, which helps give these farms a better chance of surviving."

Neighboring farmer Reiner would agree. "One hundred and seventy-nine acres is not a lot to give up if it benefits 1,500 acres of farmland across the river," he said.

To Reiner, this project illustrates a point he's been trying to make for years: Each wetlands and habitat restoration project should be considered on an individual basis.

"Yes, sometimes, a project will work for ag, but sometimes it won't," he said. "That's why this type of project shouldn't be approached in a willy-nilly way. Getting input from agriculture is critical."

With that in mind, he and some of his fellow farmers have pushed Snohomish County to map all of the productive farmland in the county so the county will know how much there is and where it is.

"With 300,000 newcomers expected in the county, we know we'll have to give up some farmland," Reiner said. "But we need to know what we can replace it with. Right now, we know about every stretch of the river, its tributaries and side channels. Yet we don't know about our farmland."

With biosecurity and food security expected to become increasingly important issues, Reiner said protecting local farmland will become more and more critical.

"We've got to be really careful about what we give up," he said.

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