

Conservation group proposes fish-friendly tide gate

By Alex Powers, Staff Writer, The Umpqua Post Newspaper

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The Port of Umpqua may get some help from a local conservation group to replace a broken tide gate with a more “fish-friendly” model.

Umpqua Soil and Conservation District staff spoke at a meeting of port commissioners earlier this month with an offer to partner with the port to install a fish-friendly tide gate at the mouth of Providence Creek.

Last fall, the port hired Coos Bay contractor Benny Hempstead Excavation Inc., to replace a pair of leaky culverts that empty Providence Creek into the Umpqua River.

A tide gate at the end of one of the culverts shattered not long after work was completed on the pipes in November. Fred Wahl Marine Construction of Reedsport has now been hired to repair the gate for an estimated \$2,000.

Between complaints of flooding from property owners along Providence Creek and footing the bill for repeated repairs to the tide gates or culverts, drainage from Providence Creek is a long-running headache for port officials.

Conservation district manager Rhonda Black said the district may apply for Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board grants to fund construction of a longer-lasting, fish-friendly tide gate.

Port Commissioner Keith Tymchuk asked if fish-friendly tide gates also are “landowner-friendly.”

Conservation district assistant Laura Smith said the district has not completed research on fish-friendly tide gates, but noted that they allow as much drainage as a standard tide gate.

“They (tide gates) are kind of a touchy issue,” Smith admitted.

But “ultimately, we want the same thing the landowners want: a permanent fix.” Black said after the meeting.

"Our problem's always been one of cost. But if you can get funding ... and enhance the fishery, I don't see this as something we need (to debate)," Commissioner Barry Nelson said.

District assistant Laura Smith said young coho salmon often seek shelter in drains and flood plains before reaching an age at which they migrate into ocean waters.

Four populations of coho salmon in Oregon and California are on the Endangered Species Act.

Smith said gates deemed fish-friendly "open wider and stay open longer, so fish can get out."

She said traditional tide gates, such as those on the Providence Creek culverts, are cast from iron and hinge from the top of a culvert. Newer designs slow down escaping water and allow fish greater access.

Smith said after viewing the remaining tide gate last week she believes the culverts are too narrow and angled too steeply — making draining water pressure too great — for most young salmon.

"That doesn't mean fish wouldn't use it," she said.

Black and Smith said the district will work with an engineering consultant to find how feasible a tide gate replacement will be. Meanwhile, the district will perform a general survey of fish, plants and other wildlife around the stream to determine what species are impacted by Providence Creek, Smith said.

If approved by the port and once fully funded, Smith said, the gates would be replaced during a strict window of time.

"The point of us doing this is getting it done right," Smith said.

Matt Ruwaldt, an estuary biologist with Partnership for the Umpqua Rivers, said the Coos Watershed Association replaced a tide gate near the east side of Coos Bay using grant funds.

While the district has an unknown number of tide gates, Black said, it made sense for the district to approach the port "because it's already an issue."

"It seems about every 10 to 15 years ... they have to make repairs,"

Black said.

Commissioners asked for a memorandum of understanding to be delivered by the district at a later Port of Umpqua meeting.