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Project alters course of river

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A $1.2 million project at Willamette Mission State Park soon will allow the Willamette River to flow through a 2-mile channel blocked by a dike since the 1940s.

It is one of a handful of key restoration projects identified by the state for partially returning the Willamette River to its historical meandering course.

The idea is to undo what has been done to rivers for the past 150 years: forcing them to flow in a single, predictable channel.

"The biggest problem with the mainstem (Willamette River) is loss of complexity — it has been straightened and dredged," said Gerry St. Pierre, restoration coordinator with Willamette Riverkeeper, which is overseeing the project. "The river is kind of a straight shot — so that a big boat could go up the river. It was designed to be navigable and meet human needs for commerce. But we don't need that anymore."

Removing the dike, river restoration advocates say, would give the river more flexibility.

Allowing the river to bend, flow into side channels and twist back and forth would create more habitat for native fish and salmon. It also would spread out the effects of flooding so that no single area is hit hard during high rains.

Smaller channels allow water to slow down and cool, which is needed by native fish, particularly salmon.

"It will help young fish as they migrate down the river and out to the lower Columbia and ocean," said Stan Gregory, aquatic ecologist with the department of fisheries and wildlife at Oregon State University. "When they migrate down in the middle of the river, they don't want to go flying down to the ocean. They need to seek refuge in slow-velocity waters and slip into those channels. And then it is also important for migrating adult salmon as they go upstream because it allows them resting places."

Lori Cain | Statesman Journal
A $1.2 million river restoration project at Willamette Mission State Park will allow the Willamette River to flow freely all year through this 2-mile side channel, which holds water in small pools. This photo shows slack water pooling near the road that leads to Beaver Island.

River restoration

The river restoration project at Willamette Mission State Park has three main ground-moving parts. Those entail:

-Excavating the side-channel inlet (where the dike was built in the 1940s): $55,000 to $60,000

-Taking out existing road to Beaver Island and culverts and putting in a bridge: about $275,000

-Removing riprap at side-channel outlet, dredging and putting in wider bridge: $90,000

Willamette Mission State Park is only one of a number of projects river advocates hope to see in the future. They want a compromise between allowing the river to flow where it wants and taming it around areas that people use.

Willamette Mission State Park is a natural choice for a restoration project because it is public land and the space is available to allow the river room to move.

The project is also a redesign of a 1990s proposal by the Army Corps of Engineers. That project was suspended in 2001 for financial reasons but not before engineering design and a biological assessment were completed.

In addition to removing the old dike, Willamette Riverkeeper plans to have the old road that goes across the channel replaced with a bridge. Currently, the road is under water most of the winter, denying access to Beaver Island for at least four months out of the year.

Beaver Island has miles of horse, bike and pedestrian trails. It's where people go to exercise their pets off-leash. The equestrian trailhead parking and overnight horse camp are both on the island, as well as the fishing dock. Beaver Island is also home to the mission trail and viewing area, the site of the former Willamette Mission, established in 1834 by the Rev. Jason Lee. A horseshoe pit and volleyball court also are flooded all winter.

This winter, the public will have a chance to comment on recreation plans, which are still being designed.

"It turns out that the way we manage properties for native fish and animals and plants also assures that the properties will be here for people to enjoy for generations to come," said Dennis Wiely with Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

The project — funded by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and the Meyer Memorial Trust — also calls for widening and deepening the channel where it joins back up with the Willamette to prevent problems for the Wheatland Ferry.

About 80 acres of weed removal and planting native species is another part of the project.

Scientists will continue to monitor the site even after the heavy work is done. They plan to monitor for native species, such as red-legged frogs and western pond turtles.

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board has targeted $6 million for restoration projects along the Willamette River for 2007 to 2009, said Ken Bierly, OWEB's deputy director.

"The emerging vision is a series of these projects — some of which are in public ownership and some in private ownership," said David Hulse, a professor in the department of landscape architecture at University of Oregon. Hulse also is on the science advisory team which reviewed the project. "We see them as a series of coordinated efforts of strongholds for natural and ecological process that slowly over the next 20 to 40 years will cover more of the river but in ways compatible with farmers continuing to farm and cities continuing to grow."

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