

First phase of Dry Creek makeover nears completion

BY MARY CALLAHAN THE PRESS DEMOCRAT on September 25, 2014, 7:14PM09/25/2014

Construction crews that have spent more than two years reconfiguring a mile-long stretch of Dry Creek outside Healdsburg are about to mark completion of the critical first leg of what, by 2020, is to be a six-mile project designed to create new habitat for threatened and endangered fish.

So far, workers have strategically placed thousands of tons of locally sourced rock and more than a thousand giant root balls and saw logs in the creek, and they've removed some 30,000 cubic yards of soil and gravel to create restful backwaters, some of which already are being used by fish species whose very survival is at risk, officials said.

The overall goal is to offer supportive habitat for coho and chinook salmon, as well as steelhead trout, that includes areas of slow-water refuge, plenty of places to hide from predators, adequate food supply and cool, shallow current — partly offsetting the loss of 130 square-miles of upstream habitat cut off by the construction of Warm Springs Dam to create Lake Sonoma in 1983.

The reservoir has offered the project one advantage: From the dam at its southern end comes a reliable supply of cold, clear water that's so rare in the Russian River watershed these days, said Eric Larson, environmental program manager for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

"Basically, it comes down to the recognition that due to the characteristics of Dry Creek following the construction of the Warm Springs Dam, Dry Creek offers a huge opportunity to create salmonid habitat in the Russian River watershed where it once did not exist," at least not year-round, Larson said.

It remains to be seen whether the entire habitat restoration effort will be enough to ensure a future for the three local species, all of them listed under the federal Endangered Species Act.

But with the first of the six miles nearly completed, the results so far appear impressive.

"This past year we saw baby coho in the demonstration project backwater thriving, which is a significant milestone in moving this project forward," Sonoma County Supervisor Mike McGuire said.

"It looks great," said Andrew Fegelman, a spokesman for Quivira Winery, one of the first properties involved in the project, which is dependent on the willingness of private landowners, mostly grape growers, to participate. "Visitors to the winery just love the fact that this project is ongoing. Everybody who comes to the winery is totally behind it."

Under a 2008 order from the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Sonoma County Water Agency has been charged with enhancing six miles of Dry Creek within the 14-mile reach between Lake Sonoma and the Russian River as a condition of continuing to use the creek to deliver water to approximately 600,000 customers in Sonoma and northern Marin counties.

The cost of the restoration is significant: about \$8 million a mile, taking into account design, engineering, construction, permitting and other costs, said Greg Guensch, an engineer and project manager for the Water Agency.

But the alternative — a now-shelved proposal for a 24-mile pipeline that would transport water from Lake Sonoma to the agency's intake on the Russian River in Forestville — would have been far more costly, officials said.

“We’ve always had two choices,” McGuire said. “Do the right thing environmentally and for the ratepayers, and advance the habitat enhancement project, or construct a pipeline that would have cost ratepayers eventually over \$300 million and disrupted the Dry Creek Valley for years with a massive construction project.

“It’s not every day the preferred option not only benefits our environment, but the taxpayers, as well,” McGuire said.

Much of the work involves excavating side channels and backwaters that extend several hundred feet adjacent to the creek and into which water can pool, creating a still place for juvenile fish to grow and for migrating adults to rest.

Experts in the specialized field of creek restoration have designed a host of other techniques to alter the flow of water and dilute its energy, stabilize stream banks, and support the growth of beneficial vegetation.

Half-ton and ton boulders, as well as lengths of fir tree lashed with cable, have been placed strategically in the creek to create not just backwaters but riffle runs and other kinds of habitat.

The work so far has been centered around the Lambert Bridge area, extending roughly a half mile in each direction, with another 1,500-foot area closer to Warm Springs Dam completed last fall by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The first Water Agency project was near Quivira Winery in autumn 2012, followed in 2013 by additional, larger scale work near Amista Winery and Dry Creek Vineyard.

An area about twice as large was restored this year, said David Manning, environmental resources coordinator for the Water Agency.

Among the projects completed since mid-June is a large-scale bank stabilization project at Dry Creek Vineyard that required installation of 950 feet of pipeline, 8 feet in diameter, to draw off the creek and bypass the construction area, now filled with huge log and boulder structures.

The pipe was dismantled earlier this month in an area that is now being excavated for creation of a backwater similar to one just completed last month slightly downstream.

“We’re definitely escalating the pace and the scale,” Manning said.

But construction will be drawing to a close in mid-October for a one-year hiatus during which the Water Agency will secure landowner permission for future projects, continue design and engineering work, acquire permits and prepare to begin again in 2016.

Guensch said the agency has lined up potential partners among Dry Creek landowners for several more miles, despite some early resistance.

Each agreement gets hammered out individually so it’s tailored to the needs of private property owners. McGuire said the deals have come together “one kitchen table at a time.”

Dry Creek Vineyard owner Don Wallace said the project on his land included removal of two or three mangled car bodies, old tires and other debris used long ago to try to stabilize the creek bank.

Early stages in the work can appear “a little clunky,” Wallace said, describing the look of a streambed overhaul.

“But they grow in, and what it becomes is pretty miraculous over time, especially the backwater features,” he said. “It’s all going to be a great benefit to the fish ... and not just the fish. Now we’ve

created a riparian corridor through here that's good for all kinds of species.”

You can reach Staff Writer Mary Callahan at 521-5249 or mary.callahan@pressdemocrat.com.

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