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Coho salmon habitat restoration underway in Pescadero

Pescadero floodplain project partners with local district and federal agency

By Holly Rusch, Daily Journal staff

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A new endangered coho salmon habitat restoration project is well underway in Pescadero, where the San Mateo Resource Conservation District has partnered with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to restore the floodplain habitat and create flood protection and agricultural security.

The project, officially titled the Butano Creek Backfield Habitat and Stream Flow Enhancement Project, was made possible through a cooperative agreement with NOAA, that provided around \$4.9 million of the \$6.5 million overall cost for the floodplain and nearby pond, as well as personnel and project design resources.

On Dec. 12, NOAA administrators, including Dr. Richard Spinrad, U.S. undersecretary of Commerce for oceans and atmosphere and head of NOAA, toured the project — which is due to be completed summer 2024.

The restoration is prioritizing building coho salmon populations as coastal communities across the Bay Area are struggling with extremely low salmon population rates and the closure of salmon fishing in 2023 and potentially 2024, as well as broader climate change impacts like heavy storms and flooding.

“Coho recovery is really driving most of this work,” Joe Issel, San Mateo Resource Conservation District director of stewardship, said. “If you do what’s good for coho, it ends up being good for everybody.”

The project has inset the plain to allow for rising water to expand safely onto uninhabited land and help connect the nearby Butano Creek to the Pescadero watersheds. The salmon will benefit from the safer, slower-moving water and more food-rich habitat but it has the whole community in mind, Issel emphasized.

“This project is not just about creating floodplain habitat for coho salmon, or flood protection for the community,” Issel said. “It’s also about, how do we build in the win that the farmer needs to have the agricultural water security, and balance the farming operation with the project.”

The project will actually benefit the “usability and diversity” of neighboring crop fields because it limits flooding danger and creates water storage through the pond element, which then mitigates the need to draw water out of the Butano Creek during the dry season, Issel said. But the restoration features aspects to facilitate growing healthy salmon as well, with natural wooden structures built within the floodplain to increase habitat complexity, he added.

The land for the Pescadero restoration is owned by the Peninsula Open Space Trust, which runs its Farmland Futures program on the property to assist local farming and agricultural businesses, Dan Olstein, director of stewardship for the Peninsula Open Space Trust, said.

The project is a part of larger countywide efforts by the Resource Conservation District and nationwide efforts by NOAA to address climate issues, including those that limit coho salmon numbers in the area.

“That’s part of our attempt to help coastal communities and coastal ecosystems. But in helping coastal communities, we’re trying to make them more resilient to extreme climate events, and of course we’re also trying to increase numbers of salmon. This is a fishing community,” David White, California supervisor of the NOAA restoration center, said. “We’re trying to make transformational level habitat restorations, which can hopefully result in increasing salmon populations.”

Part of that mission is accomplished through NOAA’s hands-on collaboration with local entities like San Mateo’s Resource Conservation District.

“That’s our special sauce at NOAA, that two-thirds of our workforce is out in the field, you’re seeing it here,” Spinrad said. “It’s that relationship that has greased the skids in terms of permitting, but also provided the subject matter expertise.”

While projects like the restoration can help salmon populations and fishing in the long run, getting back to normal might take time — longer than five to 10 years — Joe Kiernan, a research ecologist at NOAA’s Southwest Fisheries Science Center, said. But changes, like the ability to release salmon of varying ages in the area, are slowly taking place.

“If recovery is going to happen, if we’re really going to move the needle, this [project] has to be online,” Kiernan said. “We’ve made a really concerted effort, once they started taking care of some of the issues like fish kills ... we felt a little better about releasing fish. It’s a very precious commodity.”

Around 160 spawning adult salmon will be released into the Pescadero watershed in the next three weeks, Kiernan said, which is an important step forward. The Resource Conservation District has been gradually releasing salmon into their

watersheds, with 10,000 baby coho salmon released in 2019 and varying numbers of adults and juveniles released since then.

Isser said that building community trust — a successful project to prevent road flooding last year helped alleviate concerns about restoration projects, he said — is key to continuing the integral work of broad, ambitious goals and projects to mitigate the impact of climate change.

“This is what nature-based solutions to climate change looks like,” he said.

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