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FEATURED

## New habitat for fish and farmers in Pescadero

Pond work ensures safe place for salmon and water for food

By Rachel McCrea Daily Journal correspondent

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MORE INFORMATION



Down a gravel road in Pescadero, in a field bordered by Butano Creek, construction is underway on a 5-million-gallon pond about the size of 7.5 Olympic-sized swimming pools.





Coho salmon habitat restoration underway in Pescadero

The pond's not for swimming though, but rather to ensure there is enough supply for farmers and that Butano Creek will have a healthy enough flow so it will remain a habitat for endangered coho salmon.

The county's south coast relies primarily on local creeks like Butano for water, and some local farms had to scale back or stop production during recent droughts, Jarrad Fisher, the San Mateo Resource Conservation District Water Resources program manager, said. When completed, the pond will pump in water from the creek during the rainy winter and hold it through the dry season, when it will be used for farming at Fifth Crow Farm, which leases land from the Peninsula Open Space Trust. It will also capture stormwater flowing down the hillside behind it.

“Being able to create a situation where folks can take water when it’s plentiful, and store it longer term, is really desirable,” Fisher said. “It gives them — the farming operation — more water security, it leaves more water in the stream during the summer for wildlife.”

This field is downstream from Fifth Crow Farm’s other land parcels, said John Vars, one of the farm’s co-owners. That means the upstream locations get the creek’s water first and the Backfield site gets the leftovers.

“[The field] is uniquely vulnerable to running out of water,” he said.

The \$6.5 million two-year pond construction is a partnership between Fifth Crow and the district, along with The National Marine Fisheries Service, a division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, also known as NOAA Fisheries. It is funded through federal, state, county and private grants. Officially called the Butano Creek Backfield Habitat and Stream Flow Enhancement Project, construction work is contracted out to L.D. Giacomini Enterprises Inc., and it is slated to be ready for use this winter. It's part of two phases.

The first phase of the project was building a floodplain last summer across the field in Butano Creek. While its goal is to provide habitat for endangered coho salmon, it also seeks to protect threatened steelhead trout. The field was also raised several feet to mitigate flooding.

Vars estimates that the farm gave up about 3 acres of the field to the floodplain and 1 acre to the pond.

Floodplains are important for salmon because they slow down fast-moving water and give the fish a place to rest and eat, Joel Casagrande, a fisheries biologist with the West Coast region of NOAA Fisheries, said.

"[A floodplain] gives fish a place to catch their breath, and maybe get a bite to eat, and then gradually merge back into the flow," he said.

Floodplains also store sediment, keeping it from getting stuck downstream while providing spawning gravel for salmon, Amy Kaeser, a senior conservation program manager with the San Mateo RCD, said.

Floodplains also have lots of bugs, which are good eating for fish.

“When young fish are able to have some of their early life in a floodplain, they often grow much larger and they’re much more fit to survive in the future,” Kaeser said.

However, floodplains in the area have been lost. Creeks have incised, digging steep creek beds and losing access to historic floodplains, Fisher said.

Homes, farms and infrastructure along creeks is one reason for this, Kaeser said.

“We’ve really limited the ability of the creek to move and flood,” she said. “A lot of times the fish don’t have access to their historical floodplains, which at one point would’ve probably been very wide.”

Casagrande lists industrial logging and its legacy, sediment, erosion and streams incising and disconnecting from floodplains as key issues. However, loggers would also take fallen trees and debris out of channels to prevent flooding. This turned a stream into a “bowling alley” and let water run off the land quickly, but also got rid of habitat for salmon to hide and spawn, and let fine sediment into rivers, he said.

“It’s just one thing after another,” he said, “and so, over time, restoration projects have tried to chip away at reversing some of that.”

### **Key watershed**

The Butano and Pescadero watersheds have gone from being a key watershed for coho salmon to having almost none of these fish, Casagrande said. Central California Coast coho salmon are “at a high risk of extinction,” according to NOAA Fisheries.

Log piles create habitat for fish on the new floodplain, and more wood downstream backs up the water during rains. When it rains hard enough, this woody debris sends the water into a nearby forested area of the historic floodplain, Fisher said. He hopes salmon will spawn one day in this stretch of creek.

Adult spawning coho were released into Pescadero Creek last winter, part of the Pescadero/Butano Watershed. Releases are led by NOAA Fisheries and fish are sourced from hatcheries in Monterey Bay and the North Bay, Kaeser said. The state Department of Fish and Wildlife is involved with monitoring and recovery.

“Some redds — some of the fish nests — were flagged in Pescadero Creek, so we know that they laid some eggs there after their release,” she said.

Partners are looking toward the future of water security, farming and fish.

“We have a good sense of what needs to be done,” Casagrande said.

However, projects are limited by time and money. Funding is competitive, and projects need designs and permits.

“We know what to do, we just need to get the money to do it, and go forward, and be patient,” he said.

### **More work ahead**

The RCD has done 10 ponds in the past decade, Fisher said. There are three more ponds in the works upstream, and RCD’s partner Trout Unlimited works on ponds like this one up and down the California coast.

“Our goal is really to do this in scale,” Matt Clifford, the California director for Trout Unlimited, said.

For Vars at Fifth Crow Farm, the project is both a way to address current issues like stream habitat and a way to build resilience in the face of an uncertain future.

“It is a sacrifice in some ways to give up the land, but I think that it’s a really important project to help facilitate,” he said.

Fifth Crow doesn’t have to compete for finite groundwater resources, said Teresa Kurtak, another co-owner, but they need offstream water storage.

“These kinds of projects are really critical to long-term food production security,” she said.

Though the field involved in the project will take a few years to recover from construction, she said, it’s “one step toward farming into the future.”

