

Skagit Watershed Council
Technical Work Group – Final and Approved Notes
October 20, 2016, 1:00 – 4:00PM, SWC Office, Mount Vernon

(* indicates action item; indicates decision)

Attendance: Chris Vondrasek (SWC), Alison Studley, Chair (SFEG), Bob Warinner (WDFW), Kari Odden (SLT), Erin Lowery (SCL), Doug Bruland (PSE), Steve Hinton (SRSC, filling in for Devin Smith)

Guests: Polly Hicks (NOAA), Janet Curran (NOAA), Jenna Friebel (WDFW), Leah Kintner (PSP, by phone), Richard Brocksmith (SWC), Reid Armstrong (Kulshan Services)

Meeting called to order at 1 pm by chair Alison Studley.

Draft Agenda approved. August meeting notes approved.

SWC Committee Reports –

Board of Directors - Richard Brocksmith told the TWG that the Board would be reviewing the Riparian Restoration and Stewardship project Scope of Work (SOW) on Monday. The SOW draft document sent out before the meeting to the TWG for comments. None were received.

The Board will be looking to change some of the officer positions in the near future and has been looking to recruit new members.

Community Engagement Committee - Richard. The Committee met in September and October, and has been working mostly on planning. Leah Kintner from PSP came to the October meeting to present their outreach efforts on Puget Sound.

Protection Subcommittee - Bob Warinner. The Subcommittee met 10/10. It greenlighted the acquisition of 2 properties on the main stem Skagit in the Day Slough meadows area. The group also worked on formalizing a new process to approve acquisitions without having an in-person meeting (such as a synchronized conference call or webex). The group continues to make progress on the Protection Strategy update. Work has continued to develop data for a main stem assessment, to go with the tributary assessment presented at the August TWG meeting. The main stem work waits on the completion of the edge habitat analysis in the main stem by SRSC (which should be finished in early November).

Habitat Work Schedule - Alison Studley. Alison reiterated that completing updates on project work in HWS is a requirement of the SRFB funding. Bengt Miller of SFEG will be available to help sponsors finish their updates. The SWC has a goal of completing HWS update work by March.

Protection Strategy Update Workshop – Chris Vondrasek and Richard Brocksmith

Review progress on main stem assessment; provide input on remaining topics – Chris Vondrasek

Chris reviewed that at the August TWG meeting results of the tributary assessment and calculations on parcels there were presented. At the November meeting Chris plans to have a draft of main stem scores from a strawman assessment to compare to tributary scores.

Chris presented maps illustrating how the main stem floodplain forest habitats have been delineated. Mainstem ‘shadowed’ and ‘isolated’ areas (from the 2010 Middle Skagit Assessment) were overlaid with the 3 floodplain habitat classes (functioning, moderately impaired, and impaired) hand digitized through an image analysis to differentiate 6 habitat types in the main stem floodplain. Because the main stem floodplain holds more infrastructure and thus more complex shadowing and isolating features, Chris asked the TWG for confirmation of the approach of the delineations.

In the tributary assessment, there were few shadowing features separating the riparian buffer habitats from the floodplain. Chris focused attention on areas along the South Skagit highway as an illustration of areas where the road and other features separate the riparian buffer habitats from the river. He asked, when behind isolating or shadowing areas such as these does the approach to counting these habitats stay the same, or should it change? The TWG discussed various reasons that the shadowing and isolating aspects of the roads and other features diminish the habitat values of these riparian forests in the mainstem.

Chris looked at isolated and shadowed habitats from road prisms and hydromods, and illustrated with hydraulic modeling from the Middle Skagit Assessment that the isolating and shadowing features more limit channel movement than they limit water movement into off-channel habitats at high flows.

Steve raised concerns from SRSC about including habitats into the protection formula calculations beyond floodplain and into the riparian buffer. He expressed that habitats isolated beyond roads or other features should not be included.

Returning to the work in the tributaries that had been reviewed by the TWG in the August meeting, Chris illustrated about how hydromods and roads in tribs might be treated in context of shadowed and isolated habitats there. The crossings of Day and Finney Creek beneath the South Skagit highway where the road prism shadows floodplain habitats and limits channel movement were illustrated and discussed. The different scenarios in Hansen Creek and the EF Nookachamps where historic dredging and more modest hydromods separate floodplain habitats from their creeks were also looked at and discussed. The differences between forested floodplains with off-channel habitats and agricultural lands without extensive habitat value were noted. Steve asked if a more exhaustive modeling of high flows that included a look at how much water backed up from the main river into the Nookachamps or Hansen Creeks might change the areas of 100-yr floodplain there. Chris responded the EF Nookachamps upstream from the SR9 and Big Rock interchange was far enough in elevation above the Skagit that any high flow backwatering effects were likely very small.

Chris talked about main stem edge habitat data and proposed an approach for quantifying the habitat gains from tributary inputs similar to the approach taken in the tributaries (and based on the 2006 Kiffney paper). The augmentation to the reach level habitat valuations (where there are inputs from tributaries into the main stem) will be calculated based on the edge habitat widths where the tributaries enter the main stem Skagit. (Edge habitat width * (2*edge habitat width)). The edge habitat widths have been defined in Hayman et.al., 1996, and Beamer et.al., 2000.

Steve confirmed the new main stem edge habitat data will be available from SRSC first week of November.

Threat assessment proposal

A revision of the Threat Assessment component of the step-wise approach in the Protection Strategy has been shared in advance with the TWG. Although there was little time available to discuss the changes today, Richard directed members to review and ask questions of the document.

Tidegate Fish Initiative (TFI) Briefing – NOAA and WDFW staff

Polly Hicks (NOAA), Janet Curran (NOAA), and Jenna Friebe (WDFW) provided an explanation of TFI & relationship to SWC priority projects

As background, Janet described that soon after the ESA listing of Puget Sound Chinook that there was a “jeopardy opinion” that maintaining the tidegate infrastructure in the Skagit Delta likely had a detrimental impact on Chinook salmon, which prompted a thorough review of the tidegates and estuary habitat availability in the Skagit. And it pushed the parties (the farmers, the diking districts, and the NMFS and NOAA) to negotiate the TFI.

The TFI seeks to achieve Chinook estuary habitat restoration through a negotiated balance of regulatory certainty during the repair and/or replacement of Skagit Delta tidegates in exchange of credits for the conversion and restoration of agricultural lands in the Skagit Delta to support Chinook recovery goals.

The TFI when implemented will restore up to 2,700 acres of estuary habitats to achieve Chinook Recovery Plan goals.

Program works with farmers and the agricultural community to replace or repair tide gates. Using a credit/debit system, diking districts and other regulatory agencies, both allow repair or replacement of tidegates in ways that do not damage salmon habitats, and identify locations for the conversion and restoration of estuary habitats.

TFI oversight committee implements the program and supervises the use of the credits generated.

TFI Technical Committee review restoration plans and provide direction to oversight committee regarding credits available for mitigation. Review of estuary restoration projects to recommend specific credits. Review of tidegate operation improvements.

To date ~25% of Chinook recovery plan for tidal delta rearing goal achieved. Restoration projects have performed better than expected (based on two years of monitoring).

SWC Riparian Strategy Project – Chris Vondrasek and Richard Brocksmit

There were no comments of the Scope of Work (SOW) received from the TWG in writing in advance of the October TWG meeting.

Steve Hinton had questions about the level of details provided in the scope of work and whether the work will be doable within the budget. He expressed concern that the watershed council does not get into a position where we must pay for change orders or work that had been poorly defined in the SOW. He also provided a sheet of specific questions and input from SRSC to the SWC staff and the TWG. He raised concern about the use of TWG time/resources to work out details of methods. Richard expressed that part defining the best possible stewardship Plan would be to include the TWG in the early stages. The inclusion of the TWG in the first meeting with the consultant will help develop a robust assessment going forward, and a more useful Plan in the end. A discussion followed about some of the possible methodologies that may be used in a new remote sensing analysis, and about the use of publicly available analysis from WDFW.

There will be a forthcoming invitation to first technical meeting in November for TWG to provide input on the Riparian project.

Hansen Acquisition (#14-1248) Property Change Request – Steve Hinton

The TWG received documents describing the request to move acquisition funds from the use to acquire the Nielsen properties to be used on the Snyder property instead. The Nielsen property has been acquired with PSE funds. Steve went over the visual scope of the 15 acre Snyder property acquisition and how it would benefit the Hansen project including lessening some of the need to build berms to limit the channel movement and in gaining much easier access to SR20.

Change request approved

FishViews Vendor Product Information - Chris

The TWG received links to the FishViews company image and stream data gathering information website. In a conversation with the representative it seems that the data collection and specific data like bathymetry are collected per the client's order, and not collected with every float. Would group be interested in presentation by FishViews? Group proposed a brown bag presentation separate from TWG meeting this winter.

Meeting adjourned at 4:03 pm Allison Studley.

Next TWG Meetings

- November 17, 2016
- December 15, 2016
- January 19, 2017
- February 16, 2017
- March 16, 2017