

Final Notes
Skagit Watershed Council, Technical Work Group (TWG)
May 21, 2015, 1 – 4pm, SWC Conference Room

(* indicates action item; indicates decision)

Attendance: Alison Studley, (SFEG, Chair) Bob Warinner (WDFW), Devin Smith (Skagit River System Cooperative), Ed Connor (Seattle City Light), Jeff McGowan (Skagit County), Kari Odden (Skagit Land Trust), Chris Vondrasek (SWC), Rick Hartson (Upper Skagit Indian Tribe), Doug Bruland (PSE), Erik Andersen (Aspect Consulting), Phil Kincare (USFS)

Guests – Erin Lowery (Seattle City Light), Denise Krownbell (Seattle City Light), Paul DeVries (R2), Kash Nikzad (TranTech), Steve Hinton (SRSC), Richard Brocksmith (SWC) , Leah Kintner (PSP), Terry Carten (Kulshan Services)

The meeting was called to order at 1:09 pm. Next TWG meeting – tentatively scheduled for July 16, 2015, 2 – 4 pm.

Introductions, Agenda, Notes

- Approved meeting agenda unanimously.
- Approved March meeting notes unanimously, as provided by Chris Vondrasek.

South Skagit Highway Floodplain Restoration Feasibility Project

Devin Smith led the presentation. The main sponsor for this project is Seattle City Light (SCL). The intent of the presentation is to solicit feedback from TWG on the alternatives that have been developed and determine potential funding opportunities. The project is currently at the 20% design stage for the feasibility study. The South Skagit Highway currently runs through the floodplain along this stretch and isolates 62 acres of floodplain with significant impacts to wetlands. SCL currently owns 210 acres of land in the area. A 2012 SRFB grant was obtained that provided the opportunity for stakeholders to identify alternatives to improve habitat conditions.

Kash Nikzad provided a discussion of the alternatives that have been developed to date. In general the alternatives are:

- Alternative 0 – No action alternative
- Alternative 1 – the “minimum” alternative that provides increased hydraulic connectivity
- Alternative 1A – Alternative 1 that also includes increased clearance for animal crossings and connectivity culverts
- Alternative 2 – new upland highway alignment identified by the steering committee
- Alternative 3 – new upland alignment identified by the design team

A review of the alternatives was provided with an aerial photo underlay of the area.

Paul DeVries provided a description of the hydrology and geomorphology to determine bridge design criteria. An extensive field survey in 2014 was used to quantify changes in the watershed since the LIDAR data from 2006, particularly due to large changes in the landscape that had taken place as a result of the large scale debris flow event in Mill Creek in 2002. It was noted that the main concern for the Mill Creek Bridge is sediment and aggradation as well as lesser concerns related to fish passage. There are significant concerns related to fish passage in Savage Creek, an adjacent, smaller watershed with high quality habitat.

For Mill Creek, Alternative 1 would require a 300-400' span, though this alone won't significantly improve Skagit floodplain connectivity. Alternative 2 would require a 200-250' span on the new highway alignment above the floodplain to improve Skagit floodplain function. The alternative 3 relocation is below the slope break and provides the best alignment for traffic and best location for bridge relocation. Alternatives 2 & 3 both provide for height above a 100 year Skagit flood event. Alternatives 2 & 3 would also be the best fit for Savage Creek.

Kash then provided a description of transportation attributes for the alternatives. These include traffic volume (regular traffic and truck traffic), grade, sight distance, etc. Kash noted that an increase in size and complexity in bridge design increases costs related to maintenance and inspections. Foundations provide for the biggest cost in bridge construction. All alternatives focus on pre-cast concrete construction components. These alternatives will be eligible for streamlined permitting processes if construction activities can stay above the OHW mark. The alternative selection process procedure can get very complex and for this level of study the consultant team chose to use more of a simple filter process that focused on environmental, cost and then transportation factors.

Alternative 2 at Mill Creek fails due to the curve of the road and associated K value and will not be considered as a viable alternative moving forward.

A discussion ensued regarding floodplain connectivity vs. hydraulic connectivity. Floodplain connectivity would require removal of sections of the road prism. Hydraulic connectivity can be achieved by introducing new culverts that will provide benefits to fish passage (increased spawning and rearing) and wetland function while allowing the road to be modified. Improvement of wetland conditions under alternatives 2 and 3 would occur with water coming off of the hill and flowing into wetlands on the north side of the South Skagit Highway. Wildlife crossing benefits, water quality benefits and duration of construction activities were also considered.

A comparison of environmental benefits was provided followed by cost estimates for each alternative. Costs estimates are:

- Alternative 0 - \$0 (no action)
- Alternative 1 – \$8.6 million
- Alternative 1A - \$12.8 million
- Alternative 2 - \$18 million (plus \$1 million for road prism removal)

- Alternative 3 - \$17.4 million (plus \$1 million for road prism removal)

Costs increase for alternatives 1 & 1A because construction activities would occur in the existing road bed and would cause disruptions to traffic and other uses of the road.

A question was asked regarding the height needed to allow elk to go under a bridge. It has been determined that elk do not like to bend down to go under any type of structure. The scant research that is available indicates a minimum height of 10' is required for elk to transit under a bridge structure. It was noted that part of the money provided for land acquisition in this area was wildlife related.

A concluding remarks slide identified:

- Alternatives 2 & 3 provide for full floodplain connectivity
- Alternatives 1A, 2 & 3 provide wildlife crossing benefits
- Savage Creek channel enhancement could occur as a standalone project at a cost of \$3-4 million

The next steps may include selection of an alternative for further development or not. The presentation only sought feedback on costs versus benefits of projects at the site. Skagit County indicated that they are supportive of the project and may be able to provide some small level of funding support. A positive aspect of this project from a federal funding perspective is that the South Skagit Highway acts as an alternative transportation corridor to Highway 20 in the event that Highway 20 needs to be shut down for any reason.

Questions and comments from TWG included:

- Kari Odden asked if the floodplain connectivity benefit associated with Alternative 3 would require Savage Rd. to be modified or removed? Project sponsors confirmed that would provide higher benefits. Denise Krownbell confirmed one of the two homeowners along Savage Rd. is willing to sell, while the other owners do not wish to sell now but will engage with share that City Light when they become interested in selling.
- Richard asked if Alternative 1 provides any Chinook and steelhead benefits as defined in the 2015 Strategic Approach. This would be a Tier 1 project if the road is moved, so only Alternative 3 would provide significant benefits as compared to current conditions. This could change over time if more fish start to use the area. Alternative 1A would have some benefits consistent with the SWC habitat strategy. It was also noted that the smaller project specific to Savage Creek may not be appropriate for SWC.
 - Ed asked the rhetorical question "if we build it, will they come" in that do these projects provide more regular benefit to Chinook from the current condition?
- Steve noted that it may be the best strategy to pursue funding for the more expensive Alternative 3 than pursuing \$8 – 10 million for Alternatives 1 or 1A and only getting that level of benefit for the long term since rebuilding structures in their current alignment would preclude more ambitious work for many decades to come.

- Kari inquired about whether projects of this scope were receiving funding. The answer was yes though not regularly. It was noted that there is a need to pursue projects of this scope in order to significantly increase productivity.
- There was limited discussion on the project's overall cost and benefits, with questions about how many of these larger projects are currently in progress or conceptualized for the near future and how they all compare. ***SWC and sponsors should further consider scoping these near-term needs and how to most effectively develop restoration proposals.**
- Kari also inquired whether any public opinion work has been carried out related to this project. Though local landowners are generally on board, the general public may be interested in considering this use of financial resources.

Next steps include the need to select an alternative. It was determined that TWG will revisit this topic at a future meeting. The next meeting in July was considered but additional work that needs to be completed won't be done by then. ***SCL will request a project extension to provide more time for SWC to provide additional input.**

Hansen Creek Scope Change Request

Steve Hinton from SRSC provided a presentation on the Hansen Creek Project and a request to change the funding scope due to changes in acquisition status of project properties. The Hansen Creek Project is a broad strategy with multiple acquisition targets. SRSC has been able to keep landowners engaged and two prime target properties have already been acquired (Boettcher and Burress) using PSE funds. However, it turned out that SRSC can't use PSE land for match since they are unwilling to put a perpetual easement benefiting the State on these lands. Due to this, SRFB money that had already been allocated needed a change in match (that had previously been the Boettcher and Burress properties).

SRSC wants to keep their allocated funds for additional acquisition purposes in the project area. Target properties include the Nielsen and Soldate properties. At this point the owners are interested in a potential transaction but there is currently no agreement on price. It is not critical to the project to acquire these parcels but would provide additional benefit based on project objectives and successful acquisitions to date.

The second component of the request for a change in scope is to modify the acquisition only aspect of the project to a combination of acquisition and restoration as described in a handout provided by Steve. The proposed change in scope would also return \$59K to the Lead Entity.

Discussion topics included:

- Phil asked if the \$59K could be used for project design. It was noted that this would be problematic from a match perspective and design funds are already in hand.
- Alison asked if these properties have been ranked using the protection strategy formula. Steve provided that all of the properties are within Hansen's floodplain prism but have not been ranked since they are associated with a combination proposal. Steve also noted that the two target properties may not rank when run through the formula.

- Richard asked how the Soldate property relates to the request for a combination project perspective. Steve noted that the acquisition of the Soldate property may help in design flexibility related to downstream owner liability and utility easement corridor considerations. Richard noted that they may only be able to return \$21K while having to return the remainder to the State, depending on which fund sources (PSAR vs SRFB) were assigned by RCO. This may need to be addressed in order to not lose local project funding.

TWG reached consensus among eligible members to approve recommending the scope change request to the Board of Directors contingent upon revisiting the budget to determine how much of the funding to return.

***Richard will review PRISM and identify all pertinent budget and funding constraints related to the decision to approve the scope change request.**

Committee Reports

- **Board Updates**

Brenda Cunningham has tendered her resignation to the Board although she will remain through the 2015 Lead Entity process. The Board is interested in having Michael Kirshenbaum from the Skagit Land Trust fill this vacancy through February 2016.

The Board is currently planning future work and developing the budget for 2016.

Personnel policies are being updated. The general 2010 Operating Manual has been revoked and operational information is contained within the By-laws and Financial Policies for the organization.

Financial and personnel policies are being tweaked.

SWC is developing a community engagement plan and processes. It is still to be determined how as an organization SWC wants to accomplish this. The current process includes the development of community engagement goals and strategies supporting what we are already doing and providing the ability to find gaps in current efforts. One of the goals of this process is to branch out into better storytelling about SWC's progress toward identified goals. Another goal is to identify gaps in public outreach where the organization has opportunities to engage with the broader community of interest. Richard is identifying opportunities to leverage ECO Net, local MRC's and other organizations.

- **Protection Subcommittee**

At the most recent meeting, the Protection Subcommittee reviewed ongoing projects, appraisals and property rankings. The group is updating the current protection strategy

developed in 1998 including potential models to be used. The draft strategies are scheduled to be completed by December 2015. The next meeting of the group will be in June.

- **Monitoring and Adaptive Management (M & AM) Subcommittee**

Meeting notes and associated information from the M & AM meeting on May 11 were distributed. The group is meeting regularly and has a coach assisting them. The group is currently working on an update to the monitoring chapter of the 2005 Chinook Recovery Plan. The update will document existing protocols, identify desired metrics and develop new protocols and procedures for a new monitoring plan. ***Ed noted that he would like to provide comments to the list of identified metrics. Richard noted this is a work in progress and there remains opportunity for more input from the TWG and beyond.**

Lead Entity Updates

Chris Vondrasek informed the TWG that he had received no objections and several affirmations regarding the draft 2015 SRFB site visit comments that were distributed to the TRC for review. Based on this response, Chris reported back to the whole TRC that the comments were approved. It was noted that June 2 is the date that final applications are due. The next step is for the final applications to go to the TRC review panel. Alison asked if changes need to be redlined/track changes? The answer provided was yes.

The next step for TRC in this process is independent scoring followed by the scoring meeting. TRC will be asked to provide scores prior to the meeting for discussion during the second half of the meeting. Project sponsors will provide presentations at the June 10 Council of Members meeting and the first half of the June 30 TRC meeting if lingering TRC questions remain. Opportunity to respond to unanswered questions can occur at this time. The public is invited to attend June 10.

Important dates:

- June 2 – Application deadline.
- June 18 – Scoring meeting which includes sponsors during the AM.
- June 30 AM– Lead Entity Citizens Committee – half day to share information and answer questions. It was noted that June 30 PM is also the groundbreaking at Fir Island.
- July 7 AM – Final decisions will be made by the LECC.
- A meeting will be convened after final decisions have been made to reflect back on the LE process and identify how to improve the process for future efforts.

Monitoring and Adaptive Management 2015 SRFB Proposal

The M&AM Subcommittee is developing a proposal to conduct a regional monitoring project to assess the current status of and recent changes to Skagit watershed habitats used by all Skagit

Chinook salmon populations. Up to 10% of SRFB funding may be withheld for monitoring projects. Funding for monitoring projects related to SRFB funding need to go through a technical review process. TWG will act as reviewers in this case. Input and comments provided on the draft proposal will be provided back to the project sponsors for consideration. A general question was asked in regards to what the best venue is for review of this proposal. TWG members feel that the TWG is the best venue for review of the proposal though there is no additional meeting scheduled prior to the application deadline. Kari is the only TWG member not on the TRC this year (Tom Slocum is not either, but wasn't in the room that day). Richard noted that he feels that TWG is the appropriate group to move monitoring forward into the future.

The next step in the approval process is to have the draft proposal revised and approved by the M & AM subcommittee members. M & AM subcommittee members include Steve Hinton, Eric Beamer, Leah Kintner, Bob Warinner, Ed Connor/Erin Lowery, Jen O'Neal, Chris Vondrasek, Richard Brocksmith, Rick Hartson and Jeff McGowan. The current draft document was initially drafted by Richard with significant detail provided by Steve Hinton. ***The outcome of the TWG review at the meeting today is for TWG members to provide comments by June 2 and the sponsor to provide a final proposal reviewed and supported by the M&AM subcommittee to the TWG by June 10. The revised proposal will then be put on the agenda for the June 18 meeting.**

Discussion on the monitoring proposal followed and included:

- Limiting factors for Chinook include rearing habitat in the main stem and tributaries.
- The group discussed the project summary which is highlighted in the second bullet point on page 1 of the proposal.
- It was identified that the project was initially perceived as a joint sponsor proposal which provided significant logistical constraints. The end result of this is that SRSC is the primary project sponsor with support from partner organizations.

Comments and questions regarding the monitoring project proposal followed and included:

- Bob Warinner noted that the Ken Pierce change analysis would be valuable to consider. Richard responded that this information is being considered under the riparian status and trends and pressures section.
- Richard noted that the proposal only includes the main stem since tributary work was not included in the Recovery Plan at the time.
- The plan is to keep the scope of the project relatively small at this time to prevent too much funding from being diverted from other projects. There could be future annual proposals.
- Monitoring will address whether we are meeting the habitat goals in the Recovery Plan of no net loss, which is about 60% of the goals.

- The primary focus of the M & AM is status and trends in general habitat. The group agreed that this is the case but identifying causation related to a trend is not clear cut. It was noted that analysis of trends has some subjectivity and may be influenced by large scale natural events. *Effectiveness monitoring needs to be integrated into these processes. It is important to use caution when determining trends in relation to change in the physical landscape, data collection methodologies, photo resolution, etc. An example of this is trying to identify trends in side channels. No such analysis is currently included in the proposal.
- How is the issuance of HPA's affecting habitat goals?
- If funded, the money would be available in December 2015. There would be potential to fill data gaps in future years (tributaries, side channels, etc.) if funds remain available. The scope of work beyond the main stem needs to be further discussed at the subcommittee level.
- New LIDAR as a component of this project would be valuable but expensive. SCL is working to fly the entire Skagit including the development of a programmatic 5 year effort. ***Others with interest in this should talk with Erin.**

The monitoring project proposal needs to go to the LE Citizens Committee on June 30. The proposal needs to be in final form by the June 18 meeting for TWG to review and approve.

***TWG members will provide comments on the current draft by June 2.**

*** Responsible parties will continue to update the proposal and address committee comments and requests. An updated draft will be provided to TWG by June 11 (M & AM consensus approved draft).**

Adjourn 4:01 pm