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DREW — One fish in Joe Hall Creek is all it took for this sleepy community to rethink its relationship with nature and the U.S. Forest Service.

Two fish, three fish — a whole lot of fish later — and



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Stan Petrowski stands by logs that were placed in Joe Hall Creek as part of a restoration project to fortify coho salmon habitat in the creek. Joe Hall Creek runs through Petrowski's Drew ranch and he helped the U.S. Forest Service with the project.

MICHELLE ALAIMO/ N-R staff photo

residents who live between Tiller and Jackson County now anticipate coho salmon to complete a life cycle in Joe Hall Creek this winter for the first time in 50 years.

"What we'd like to see is thousands and thousands of coho returning to Joe Hall," said Stan Petrowski, a Drew rancher whose 78-acre spread called Singing Falls sprawls east of Tiller Trail Highway and is split diagonally by Joe Hall Creek. "But realistically, usually there's a 3 percent return rate."

Coaxing Joe Hall Creek's spawning grounds back to their former bubbling ferocity will take a while. The reddened coho salmon, known in the area as the "Thanksgiving fish" for its timely arrival, were once so thick in numbers, old-timers used to say a person could cross the creek by walking on their backs.

And then they seemed to disappear forever – until a few returned to the drainage in November 2004.

At first it was one fish, swimming alone in a pool as if it had lost its way from Elk Creek.

"Well, that's not going to be very productive," Petrowski thought of it at the time.

But more fish came. In all, seven females and one male returned to plow redds in the gravel and bring the barren creek back to life.

"I was totally taken by it," said Petrowski, an Angora goat rancher who moved to the area in 1991 with his wife, Alexandra, with whom he spins mohair in their modest cottage.

Elated, he enlisted his neighbors to help with a lookout for more returning coho salmon.

"Before it was all over, you could see my neighbors standing on bridges and over creeks looking for salmon," he added.

Word of the return spread rapidly. Soon the U.S. Forest Service came calling.

"You want to do something for these fish?" a fisheries biologist from the Tiller Ranger District of the Umpqua National Forest asked Petrowski.

"I don't trust you," Petrowski replied.

And neither did his neighbors.

Well known in the area is the Forest Service's long-ago abandoned practice of removing trees and woody debris from rivers and creeks in the 1940s and 50s. The theory was that it improved habitat for anadromous fish. It couldn't have been further from the truth, as it turned out.

"Those idiots are the ones that had us take the wood out in the first place," Petrowski's neighbors would say.

Casey Baldwin, the Tiller fisheries biologist, insisted mistakes were of the past and that old timber harvest



Casey Baldwin, a fisheries biologist for the U.S. Forest Service at the Tiller Ranger District, looks for juvenile coho salmon in Joe Hall Creek last week. Salmon have just begun returning to the Drew-area creek recently.

MICHELLE ALAIMO/ N-R staff photo

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methods, which had a debilitating effect on salmon habitat, had largely changed. With the Forest Service's help, Baldwin said Petrowski could propagate coho salmon on his own land.

Petrowski began to come around. And then there was the connection: He saw the relationship between the salmon on his property with the wildlife in the forest surrounding his home and also with struggling fishermen on the Oregon Coast.

"The whole picture just lit up for me," he said. "The fact that the fish came back, on my property, made me feel like, 'Hey, this is a responsibility.'"

One hundred and sixty-one logs and 220 boulders later, Joe Hall Creek and its tributary are primed for the return of the first coho salmon spawned there in half a century.

"I would hope to see 25 fish," Baldwin said of that return.

However, there are many uncontrollable factors, he said, that make any return unpredictable: Out-migrating coho smelt have birds and bass in the South Umpqua and main Umpqua rivers to hide from. Once they make it to the ocean, where they live for about 18 months and fatten up, there's the real "wild card" — ocean conditions and harvest.

Whatever the return of those fish that brought Joe Hall back to life three years ago, Petrowski will likely be the first to see it. Sometimes, however, they get by without him seeing them.

Salmon returned to Joe Hall Creek the winter following the year Petrowski noticed them, but were not visible this past winter. But they were in there. On the banks of the narrow creek, small coho fry can be seen zipping around and under large logs that were placed in and around the creek's channel last summer.

"We got baby coho all in there, so I guess they snuck by me," Petrowski said.

Those fish and incoming salmon fry from next winter's spawn will receive a helping hand from Baldwin and Petrowski. Joe Hall Creek tends to run dry by August and has very few pools for fry to find shelter. So the landowner and the biologist will hand-scoop the fry from the creek and transport them to the more robust Elk Creek, a tributary of the South Umpqua River which Joe Hall flows into.

In the future, Joe Hall Creek should begin to rebuild itself with heavy winter flows. There wasn't a heavy rain event last winter to bring down a lot of woody debris and rock to plug-up against the placed logs and boulders, but eventually, the restoration work should pay off in "dividends," Baldwin said. "Hopefully, everything starts to kick in."

In the meantime, some of Petrowski's neighbors have taken their own steps to bring Joe Hall and other area creeks back to their former characteristics with the re-introduction of beavers.

"They're geniuses at what they do," said Leonard Houston, who, with his wife, Lois, have taken up the cause of beaver reintroduction to the Tiller Ranger District and the rest of Western Oregon so enthusiastically they have created a Beaver Advocacy Committee and pass out fliers and make speeches on their cause.

His neighbor agrees.

"We don't need a (Army) Corps of Engineers permit to build a dam, if the beavers are doing it," Petrowski said. "Their little ponds become the perfect refuge for salmon."

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