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By Alex Powers, Staff Writer

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Watershed projects near Reedsport aim to enhance salmon numbers

When Partnership for the Umpqua Rivers wanted near-perfect fish habitat to improve, it found some, ironically, in Reedsport's back yard.

The Reedsport city council last week granted Matt Ruwaldt, an estuary biologist for PUR, permission to move ahead with the group's plans for potential restoration projects on city-owned property near Scholfield Creek.

Ruwaldt said the creek is host to an outstanding estuary, complete with functioning water channels, little human impact and few invasive plants.

But "it can offer more with some restoration work," he said.

The group will further restoration efforts at other sites, he said, after a project implemented last year at Dean Creek has flourished.

PUR in 2009 hired a helicopter crew to place many dozens of logs at sites throughout the tidal wetlands near the creek's confluence with the Umpqua River. Such estuaries, Ruwaldt said — where freshwater tributaries meet tidal waters — are important for young fish, especially coho salmon.

Historically, he said, most estuaries in the region were spruce swamps. Those are tidal wetlands that offered protection for young salmon from predators, and food such as insects to munch on.

"With that (swamp) ... they had huge amounts of debris, provided lots of holes for fish to hide in and for food sources to thrive in," Ruwaldt said.

The spruce trees, however, vanished — logged, he said, for aircraft construction during World War II.

Today, research published by South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve shows 62 percent of Umpqua River estuaries are filled or have been heavily altered, Ruwaldt said. Many wetlands in coastal Douglas County were diked for hay fields or cow pastures, most in the last 100 years.

Ruwaldt said just 19 percent of estuaries are completely intact.

That makes estuaries on Scholfield Creek, near Reedsport, a great find, he said.

He wasn't sure how the estuary survived. Modern regulations won't allow the city to develop the property, more than 100 acres, which is in a flood plain.

Scholfield Creek forms in the Elliott State Forest, flowing through state, county and private land.

"Maybe because they (estuaries) were owned by those large entities, they survived that diking and ditching," Ruwaldt said. "It's a miracle, though."

PURS already believes Scholfield Creek is a strong habitat for young salmon.

"The only thing it needs is some woody debris, maybe some spruce trees to further its function," Ruwaldt said.

He said about 130 spruce saplings are thriving at the Dean Creek project.

"As they grow up, they'll fall down and make more woody debris," Ruwaldt said. As the debris returns, so do the fish.

Ruwaldt said juvenile salmon already have been seen around the log structures. PUR



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estimates the Dean Creek project could increase the local coho population by thousands of fish.

PUR will seek U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board grants. Ruwaldt said his next step is to bring a draft grant application and detailed project design before the Reedsport City Council at its Sept. 13 meeting. The deadline for submitting the grant application is in October.

Ruwaldt said if the city signs off on the design and other details, PUR will oversee groundwork on city property, and on a private ranch inside city limits. The city's involvement — of financial and/or labor contributions — would be "only as involved as it chooses to be," he told the council. The project would be completed by the end of 2012.

Other projects are scheduled in that time frame, farther up Scholfield Creek.

"We're working from the headwaters down," Ruwaldt said.

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Who does what?

Partnership for the Umpqua Rivers will provide all grant-writing, site design and construction services for its proposed wetlands restoration project.

The City of Reedsport would provide only permission to access the lands in question and some in-kind matches in the form of city personnel and volunteers' time.

Who benefits?

The city would benefit, according to PUR estuary biologist Matt Ruwaldt, with the "good publicity" sure to come as salmon stocks and the area's natural beauty continue to improve. In addition, the proposed restoration projects would provide some local employment, since as many elements as possible will be contracted out locally.

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