

Burke Mountain Naturalists Oppose Fish Channel Construction at Colony Farm

Over the years, the Burke Mountain Naturalists have supported many projects to enhance salmon habitat throughout the Tri-Cities. We participated in BC Hydro's planning process for the Coquitlam River and advocated for restoration of sockeye to this River. In recent years, we supported work at Colony Farm to create a fish channel in the "sheep paddock" area at Colony Farm Regional Park beside the Lougheed Highway in Coquitlam. However, we now find ourselves in the unusual position of not supporting a new proposal to create more fish channels at Colony Farm. The reasons for our concerns are two fold:

1. Deleterious impact on rare and critical habitat for birds including species at risk:

The work is proposed in an area, the north field on the Port Coquitlam side of Colony Farm Regional Park, which consists mainly of a rare type of bird habitat called "old field" habitat. Creation of fish channels and related work would destroy and alter some of this habitat. In addition, construction work, with bulldozers, etc., would occur during a time (late summer/ early fall) when this area is heavily used by many species of birds for feeding, growing new flight feathers and preparing for long migrations.

2. Dubious value of constructed fish channels for salmon:

The fish channels to be created are unlikely to be of much value to salmon, particularly for the coho and chinook for which the project is ostensibly designed. The similarly-constructed tidal fish channel in the sheep paddock area has been shown to provide poor habitat for salmon. Studies carried out by BC Hydro, several years after the construction work was completed and during a period of the year when salmon were predicted to use the channel, showed that, while the channels were used by some coarse fish, coho comprised only 0.19% of the fish trapped and no chinook were found. Of the fish trapped, over 70% were threespine stickleback. In contrast, of the fish found in Mundy Slough at the entrance to the channel, 8.8% of the fish trapped were coho. Thus, coho were approximately 50 times more abundant at the entrance to the fish channel than in the fish channel. Clearly, this tidal fish channel is of very limited value to salmon.

Why Old Field Habitat is Valuable

Old field habitat is defined as a meadow of tall grasses. This habitat is used by voles, i.e., meadow mice, which are a critical source of food for several species of larger birds including barn owls and short-eared owls (both species at risk). During the winter months, great blue herons (also at risk) rely on these voles as a source of food. This is especially true for juvenile herons as they lack the skills to catch fish. Old field habitat also supports a number of smaller birds which nest on or close to the ground. These include species which are now quite rare in the lower mainland such as savannah sparrow and western meadowlark. One of the main reasons why Colony Farm was protected in 1995 was because of its old field habitat. In particular, the northern field where the fish channel work is proposed is the largest protected area of old field habitat in the lower mainland. As such, it provides a type of habitat more rare than a salmon stream.

Our Recommendation

The new fish channel work is proposed as habitat compensation for construction of the new Port Mann Bridge. The intention is to create new salmon habitat to replace habitat that will be lost outside of the Coquitlam River watershed. The fish channel work is estimated to cost \$2.2 million. Instead of this project, we recommend the proponents meet with local stream stewards and Kwikwetlem First Nation to discuss how such funds could be better spent to create habitat that will truly benefit salmon.

You can provide comments on this project by attending a meeting on Monday, May 3 meeting (5-8 pm) at Leigh Square next to City Hall in Port Coquitlam and filling out a comment form. The Open House (5-7pm) will be followed by a presentation at 7 pm plus questions and answers. If you cannot attend, input can be provided by emailing <info@pmh1project.com>. We would appreciate receiving a copy of your email – please send this to <colonyfarm@gmail.com>. Thanks! Burke Mountain Naturalists. www.bmn.bc.ca