



A Good Turn for the Tolt: Levee Setback/Salmon Habitat Project

Frequently Asked Questions

Question: Why restore salmon habitat?

Answer: Salmon are an enduring symbol of the Pacific Northwest, providing direct and indirect benefits to our culture, economy, and environment. Healthy salmon populations mean that our region is a healthy place to live and work. Salmon have been integral to Native American culture for centuries, and federal treaties assure the tribes continued access to healthy salmon stocks.

The federal government lists Puget Sound Chinook salmon, as well as bull trout, as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This means they are likely to become endangered, or at a high risk of extinction, if steps to protect them are not taken soon. Science indicates that land uses affecting the salmon's freshwater habitat are among the primary causes for the species' decline.

Although the federal government administers the ESA, everyone shares the responsibility to protect these animals, because everyone depends on healthy land and water resources. Local governments throughout Puget Sound are implementing projects to protect and restore salmon habitat.

Question: Can the Tolt River really be restored?

Answer: To prevent the river from flooding adjacent lands, levees were constructed along the lower Tolt in the 1940s. While partially successful, the levees dramatically changed the river's behavior and fish habitat. In a more natural condition, the river is connected to its floodplain, has more room to move back and forth, and creates meander bends and split channels. A natural river also captures large pieces of wood from trees along the bank. Together, these processes result in a complex mix of large and small channels, riffles and pools, and instream wood and overhanging vegetation. These are the habitat features that salmon need at one or more stages in their life cycle in order to thrive.

Moving the levee back several hundred feet will create a broader area of active floodplain. While still controlled by levees at each edge of the active floodplain, the river will resume its natural process of meandering and moving sediment and pieces of wood. Though not a totally natural condition, this will restore much of the river's lost habitat function. Restoring these features means increased future salmon populations.



Question: Why are King County and the City of Seattle sponsoring this project?

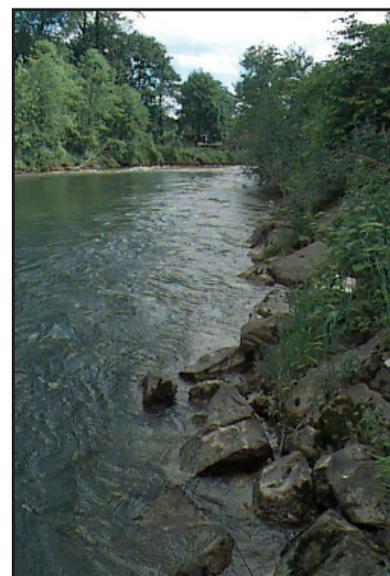
Answer: Local governments in the Puget Sound region are responding to the ESA listing of Chinook salmon as a threatened species. They are motivated both by the opportunity to protect a valued natural resource and by the uncertainties and risks posed by the federal listing. Both King County and the City of Seattle have set aside funding for salmon restoration projects. Historically, the Tolt River contained excellent salmon habitat, and it provides a good opportunity for restoration.

King County is involved in the project through its Department of Natural Resources and Parks because of its core interest in protecting and enhancing natural resources. The Parks Division is central to this effort as well, because the project is proposed to take place within the County’s Tolt River - John MacDonald Park. The City of Seattle owns and operates the South Fork Tolt water supply and hydroelectric project upstream and is performing voluntary habitat projects to benefit Chinook salmon and other species.

Question: How would Tolt River - John MacDonald Park and its recreational opportunities be affected?

Answer: Project proponents are working to address recreational issues. While the areas along the north bank of the Tolt River will change significantly, our goal is to replace the existing recreational uses with similar recreational access, opportunities and natural amenities.

- Aside from temporary construction impacts, the project will not affect the existing developed parts of the park, such as the camping areas, ball fields, or Snoqualmie footbridge.
- Most of the “dike road” along the river’s north bank will no longer exist. Replacement parking will be provided at both ends of this half-mile river reach. Fishermen and others will continue to have similar access to the river.
- The new levee will have a paved pedestrian path along its top, providing a universally accessible trail from the main park area to the State Route (SR) 203 bridge. The underpass will be improved to allow trail users to pass easily underneath the bridge.
- The river corridor itself will have a more natural condition, with increases in both gravel bars and large woody debris. It is likely that the river will split into two or more channels, and there will be a mixture of channel flows, depths, and bank conditions that will change over time. The project design includes construction of paths within the floodplain to provide park users with an opportunity to access and enjoy this dynamic and productive habitat type.
- The project will likely affect the floating experience in the lowest one-half mile of the Tolt River. In the absence of a right bank levee, the channel will no longer be confined to a narrow channel and is likely to meander more and split into multiple channels. The channel will likely be shallower and slower, which may reduce its appeal to floaters. While the channel may be shallower on average, there likely will be more diversity in channel characteristics, including large wood that may make river floating impractical in this reach. One feature that is not currently present, but is expected to form, is pool habitat (short lengths of slow, deep water). These areas may provide nice swimming holes for park users, potentially offering a replacement use for any lessened tubing experiences.



Levee on the lower Tolt



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- In addition to structural and landscape components supporting pedestrian access, the project will provide informational and interpretive signage for the benefit of park users.

Question: What information is King County and the City of Seattle using to make decisions?

Answer: King County and the City of Seattle hired a team of consultants led by Parametrix, Inc, a respected local firm, to study approaches for restoring habitat on the Tolt River. By examining more natural areas upstream and in neighboring systems, experts found the most effective way to restore habitat is for the levees to be moved, allowing the river to do the work of creating a more natural condition. It was then agreed that King County engineers would design the project, aided by leading consultants on floodplain dynamics, Herrera Environmental Consultants, and on landscape design, Cascade Design Collaborative.

Using public input to identify the most important community issues, King County and the City of Seattle have provided the design team with objectives to guide the design process. This effort has generated the three primary project goals of restoring habitat, maintaining flood protection, and protecting and improving park recreation.

Question: Will moving levees affect flood protection?

Answer: Flooding is a significant issue for the Snoqualmie Valley and properties close to the Tolt River. Floods, such as those that inundated the Valley in the 1990s, cause significant damage and inconvenience to residents and businesses. In the lower-most reach, Tolt levees have little effect on flooding, as the Snoqualmie River is the dominant factor in major flood events. This project is anticipated to reduce flood risk a small amount during typical Tolt River flood events, by providing a larger area between the levees to contain both gravel accumulation and flood flows. The new levee will be constructed to the same height as the old one, thus maintaining the same level of flood protection.

Question: What permits or environmental review will be required?

Answer: Federal, state, and local permits are required, as is an environmental checklist as part of the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review. The environmental checklist and Determination of Non-significance were issued on June 22, 2006. The comment period for the SEPA process will be open until July 28, 2006. Upon completion of SEPA requirements, permits will be obtained from King County, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington Department of Natural Resources, Washington Department of Ecology, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers between October 2006 and May 2007.

Question: How will art be incorporated into the project?

Answer: The regional agency supporting arts and culture (4Culture, see www.4culture.org) selected the Tolt project as a “1% for Arts project” - meaning that the project will also include a public art component. Community members were instrumental in selecting the artist, Elizabeth Conner. Ms. Connor wishes to capture the character of the site and the local community in her work. She will attend the June 28th public meeting to learn more about the community and its interaction with the park and the Tolt River.



Question: What is the project's schedule?

Answer: The SEPA checklist and Determination of Non-Significance commences the permitting process that will continue into spring 2007. We expect to receive all permits by May 2007. The design will be refined through the summer and completed by early 2007. Construction is expected to begin in the summer of 2007 and may extend into 2008. However, construction will only occur during the “fish window” (the time when salmon are not migrating through the project area), meaning that no construction is likely to occur between November and April or May of either year.

Question: How much will it cost and how will it be paid for?

Answer: Cost estimates based on the preliminary design effort indicate that the project will cost approximately \$4 million to construct. The City of Seattle is the lead project financial sponsor, along with King County as the landowner and designer. The project also has secured nearly \$2 million in grant funding from the Salmon Recovery Funding Board, the State Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account, and the King Conservation District.

Question: Who are the decision makers?

Answer: Technical and property management staff from King County and Seattle will make recommendations on project requirements and use of Tolt River - John MacDonald Park after obtaining public input. Ultimately, decisions to commit major capital funds to the project will require approval of the King County Council and Executive and the Seattle City Council and Mayor.

A multi-agency project team comprised of the following members is leading development of the project:

- Seattle Public Utilities, Surface Water Division
- Seattle City Light, Environmental Affairs Division
- King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks
- Water and Land Resources Division
- Parks and Recreation Division
- River and Floodplain Management Unit

Question: After this project is implemented, what's next?

Answer: This project is a major step toward restoring salmon habitat in the lower Tolt River. As an innovative effort, significant monitoring will be done to evaluate how well the project is working.

In addition to this restoration project, the City of Seattle, the City of Carnation, and King County have protected Tolt River habitat through acquisition of high quality riparian areas. Acquisition activities are expected to continue, as interested sellers are identified. Additional habitat restoration potential exists directly upstream from the SR 203 bridge. If work in the lower reaches performs as expected and future grant funding becomes available, the project partners may discuss the possibility of additional levee setback work upstream in future years.



Currently the lower Tolt is straightened by levees in Tolt MacDonald Park.