



Native Fish Society

PO Box 568

Molalla, OR 97038

503-829-6202

nativefishsociety@molalla.net

The Voice for Native Fish

Conserving biological diversity of native fish and protecting their habitats

September 17, 2009

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BATES PARK MASTER PLAN ADOPTED

Contact: Jim Myron, John Day Basin River Steward, 503.819.5589

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Commission adopted the master plan for Bates State Park at their meeting today in Enterprise. The plan defines the level of development that will occur at the site over the next 20 years under the management of the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD).

While not supporting the immediate removal of Bates Dam and Pond, the Commission did approve further study of the issue, which could lead to a final decision on the matter at a later date. The plan will now be the subject of an administrative rule amendment process by OPRD as well as a land use planning proposal to the Grant County Court for their approval of the planned developments.

Bates Dam and the pond behind it were built as part of the Bates Mill operation in the late 1940s on lower Bridge Creek, a tributary of the upper Middle Fork of the John Day River. Since construction, and until 2001, the dam completely blocked fish passage between upper Bridge Creek and the Middle Fork. The public paid for the construction of a fish ladder in 2001, but water quality problems continue to plague the facility.

The water released from the pond into the creek below is several degrees warmer than the water entering the pond. This increase in temperature violates state water quality standards and will require OPRD to take certain actions to reduce the temperature of the water entering the stream. Removing the dam and pond may be the only viable alternative to bring OPRD into compliance with state water quality standards.

As a commitment to resolving the water quality issue, the Commission added the following statement to the plan: "OPRD will work with natural resource agencies in developing a potential mitigation and compliance approach that will be consistent with water quality standards."

The master plan for the park states that OPRD's goal is to save the dam and pond and seek other solutions to the water quality problems instead of removing the dam. The plan reacts to the desires of the local community to keep the dam but leaves consideration of restoring the ESA-listed wild steelhead in the stream to a future natural resource plan.

The Upper Middle Fork watershed has been a focal point in recent years for state, federal, tribal and non-government agency actions in their attempt to protect and restore habitat for the steelhead and for spring Chinook in the system. As an example, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board has invested over \$6 million in Grant County over the past 10 years, with a large portion of that investment going to projects in the Middle Fork.

“Restoring healthy native fish populations is complex and difficult work, requiring cooperation among state, federal and tribal agencies and the public,” said Bill Bakke of the Native Fish Society. “We hope that by adopting this plan, OPRD has decided to be an active partner in this long-standing effort to improve this watershed.”

The Native Fish Society will be seeking the necessary funding to complete a comprehensive review of the benefits of dam removal compared with OPRD’s approach of saving the dam and attempting to mitigate for the damage it is doing to the fish and the watershed.

“We remain hopeful that once all of the facts are known, it will be clear to the Commission and the department that the best course of action, now that the property is owned by the public, is to drain the pond, remove the dam and begin the restoration of lower Bridge Creek to a healthy functioning system once more,” Bakke concluded.

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