

Tide gates create a nursery for young coho salmon

By Clark Walworth
CIT Communications Director

COQUILLE, Ore. – With the touch of a button, tides have begun flowing into a section of the Coquille Valley where they had been absent for more than a century.

A decade of collaborative work by ranchers, conservationists, sportsmen and the Coquille Tribe is restoring a rich habitat for threatened coho salmon in the Winter Lake area. The project is known as Coquille Working Landscapes, and expectations are high.

“The uplift that it will bring to the species will bring that population a little closer to delisting,” said Helena Linnell, a Tribal biologist who helped secure crucial funding for the project.

Last year the project replaced antique tide gates with modern upgrades. New high-tech controls let ranchers raise and lower the gates from a digital keypad – or even from a cell phone. The seven gates, each eight feet by 10 feet in size, control the flow of water into and out of the project’s channels.

Channel construction ended this fall, and three of the gates opened for the first time on Oct. 11. Water flowed into 400 acres of bottomland northwest of Coquille, providing ideal winter habitat for juvenile coho. In all, more than 1,700 acres of restored floodplain will showcase agriculture coexisting profitably with conservation.

Steve Denney, one of the project’s original organizers, said the restored tide-



Project partners gathered Oct. 11 to see water flow through the new tide gates for the first time.

lands will accommodate 250,000 smolts, potentially returning an additional 15,000 adult coho each year to the Coquille River. The river’s coho runs in recent years have been as sparse as 5,000 adult fish.

Juvenile coho spend their first year in fresh water, preparing for their future life at sea. Not only are the tidelands’ sheltered waters expected to produce more fish, they’ll also help the young salmon outgrow their river-dwelling cousins.

Along with coho, the water will benefit Chinook salmon, lamprey, migrating waterfowl, raptors and other wildlife. Linnell called a project “a great example of large-scale restoration.”

When ancestors of the Coquille Tribe roamed the region, the Winter Lake area was a fresh-water tidal forest. Denney said

the boggy ground teemed with ash, willow, alder, cottonwood, Sitka spruce and Oregon crabapple.

“The old records say this was so thick, they couldn’t even get their survey equipment in here,” he said. Settlers arriving in the 19th century cleared and diked the land for agriculture.

Spilling tidewater into eight miles of newly dug canals won’t restore pre-settlement conditions. Thanks to the new tide gates, however, browsing cattle will share the land gracefully with fish, fowl and other critters.

Ranchers will benefit in multiple ways. By letting landowners flush the canals, the new tide gates will reduce maintenance costs and improve water quality. Bringing water to the land in late summer will extend the graz-

ing season – and the ranchers’ profits.

“We think this is kind of a prototype for all the Oregon Coast,” Denney said.

Denney, a retired ODFW biologist, launched the project in 2008, along with rancher Fred Messerle and the Beaver Slough Drainage District. Some of the early funding came from the Coquille Tribe, which remained involved throughout the project. Linnell’s work helped secure \$700,000 in grant funding.

“The Tribe’s been with us the entire time and been great to work with,” Denney said.

If all goes as expected, the Tribe’s investment will be repaid in fish. The overwintering smolts will reinvigorate a resource that is the Coquille people’s ancient legacy and ancestral birthright.