

Is Gravel Worth More Than A Wetland?

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Reintroducing salmon to a stream that hasn't seen a fish run in over 50 years sounds pretty good to most people. But when the project is tied to a proposed mining expansion that could potentially deplete an underground water supply directly impacting DuPont's Edmonds Marsh, well, lets just say things start to smell a little...fishy.

During the March 3 DuPont Parks Agency Meeting, Glacier Northwest representative Pete Stoltz said Glacier "was giving the City of DuPont a 4,000 foot green space with a salmon stream in the backyard." Many wondered why a gravel company would want to create a salmon stream. Glacier's Pioneer Aggregate Mine is seeking a city permit to expand its operations southward by 177 acres towards Sequelitchew Creek and the new DuPont Civic Center. Glacier wants to mine out the aggregate (gravel) that is buried deep in the ground. The aggregate located under DuPont is the oldest and cleanest rock found in the United States. Glacier Northwest began their DuPont mining operations in 1997. Today, Pioneer Aggregates produces over 200 different blends of sand and gravel at the mine. Eighty percent of those blends are shipped by barge weighing 6,000 tons. Washington State transportation projects such as the 520 bridge replacement, or Sound Transit light rail expansion, keep DuPont's high-quality aggregate in high demand.

To reach the aggregate, Glacier will have to puncture an aquifer and drain it. This is where the fish and a new tributary called North Sequelitchew Creek come into play. According to Stoltz, the new tributary would be graded to optimize stream flow, minimizing stream debris and water flow into existing Sequelitchew Creek. Glacier would eventually build a foot bridge across the new tributary near its junction with existing Sequelitchew Creek. Glacier claims they are saving Sequelitchew Creek from years of neglect and abuse during the DuPont Company era. Stoltz showed historic photos from the DuPont Museum documenting a hydroelectric dam being built on Sequelitchew Creek, and other mining mishaps. "We're here to clean up the creek. It's going to cost money to do this, but we want to do it," he said.

What Glacier doesn't like to talk about with out their experts is the adverse effects on ecosystems in both Sequelitchew Creek canyon and Edmonds Marsh. Glacier's Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the project addresses in depth the underground water loss to Edmonds Marsh. Their groundwater impact analysis states that West Edmonds Marsh will see an aquifer drawdown between 6 to 18 inches, lowering the wetland water levels and speeding up the drying out time of the marsh by one to two months. The dry conditions residents see during August would instead appear in June. West Edmonds Marsh is located east of Center Drive and south of Sequelitchew Creek. The 1843 Fort Nisqually site is located there, along with mature, historic trees that have been around for over one hundred years. Will a drop in the underground water level kill off the trees? Glacier doesn't know, and believes that most of their ground water modeling predicts a worse case scenario. When The Home Town Clipper asked Stoltz how Glacier intends to mitigate a drop in the groundwater level under Edmonds Marsh, Stoltz's could only say that they too are concerned about Edmonds Marsh, and that Glacier's experts would have to answer that question. Glacier's supplemental Plants and Animals report indicates that the increased drying out time of Edmonds Marsh will affect the established mating and reproductive cycle of the marsh's ever present singing amphibians. Less water could mean less frogs.

In Sequelitchew canyon, where the proposed tributary and existing creek would meet, a drastic change to the landscape would occur. Glacier provided before and after photos showing the canyon being stripped of its canopy of big leaf maples, western red cedar and red alder trees, allowing large amounts of sunlight into an area that is typically protected from the sun. Glacier admits it will take quite a while for the canyon to recover from the tree loss. "Construction of the confluence of both streams would take place seven years into the project," said Stoltz. "Reclamation of this area would be immediate as we want plants to be established as quickly as possible." Glacier's

Plants and Animals Technical Report reveals that “construction of the proposed mine expansion could reduce and degrade existing habitat for a number of bird species which utilize habitats within the impacted area...the clearing of vegetated areas could eliminate the existing foraging and breeding habitats for birds. There could be a decrease in connectivity between forested habitats within Fort Lewis and the Nisqually Delta.” Edmonds Marsh and Sequalitchew Creek Canyon are nesting spots for many of the thousands of birds that migrate through the Nisqually Wildlife Refuge, which is half a mile up the shoreline from the base of Sequalitchew Creek.

But to Glacier, it’s not about protecting birds, frogs, wetlands or trees. It’s about protecting gravel mines. “We have to protect gravel mines for the end users,” said Scott Nicholson, the General Manager of aggregate operations for Western Washington. “We have a regional advantage here in DuPont. If we have to truck or ship in aggregate from a different supplier such as British Columbia or somewhere on the east coast, construction costs go up.”

According to the City of DuPont Land Use Code Sensitive Areas Ordinances, “West Edmond Marsh is considered a Class I wetland by the City of DuPont due to the large area of high quality wetland habitat and its irreplaceable value to the City.” The question of whether gravel is worth more than a wetland and multiple ecosystems remains to be seen.