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State program helps flooded Tahuya families, salmon

TAHUYA—Winter storms used to mean panic and worry for families in the Hog Ranch Road community of the Tahuya Peninsula in Mason County. When the 2003 winter storms washed out the culverts and flooded their roads and driveways, several families were stranded. They couldn't get out and rescue crews couldn't get in.

After trying unsuccessfully for a year to get loans and grants to fix the culverts, Jim Scott, president of the nine-family neighborhood association, saw a flier for the state's new Family Forest Fish Passage Program, one week before the application deadline. The program was created by the state Legislature last year to address barriers to fish passage on private timberlands like the Hog Ranch Road families'.

Scott filled out the one-page application form and sent it in. He soon was contacted by the Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group, a group that works with landowners on projects to restore salmon habitat. The group visited the Hog Ranch families and had an engineer draw up plans to replace the failing culverts.

The Hog Ranch Road community is near Erdman Creek, which drains Erdman Lake, a large wetland used by salmon. The Erdman Creek culvert had collapsed and was preventing salmon from migrating. Once replaced, more than 2 miles of spawning and rearing habitat were reopened to salmon. Within a half-mile was a second set of culverts. Two culverts on Haven Lake Creek had been squashed. These culverts drain into the Tahuya River, which is home to

Salmon Recovery Funding Board
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Chinook and chum salmon, which are threatened with extinction, as well as coho and steelhead salmon. The two culverts were replaced with a railroad car turned bridge, opening up more than 3.7 miles of spawning and rearing habitat. The two projects opened about 200 acres of rearing habitat to salmon in the seven lakes in the watershed.

“The landowners were desperate for help and this was an important area for salmon,” said Neil Werner, executive director of the Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group. “We were able to help them as well as the salmon. The projects came off without a hitch.”

For landowners who qualify, the program will provide 75-100 percent of the cost of removing or replacing culverts, earthen dams and other obstructions to fish passage caused by human activity on fish-bearing streams that run through small, private forestlands. To qualify, landowners must have harvested no more than 2 million board feet of timber per year during the previous three years and must certify that they will not exceed that threshold for 10 years after applying for assistance.

The Hog Ranch Road culvert replacements were one of 96 projects to qualify for assistance last year through the program, which is jointly administered by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Washington Department of Natural Resources and the Salmon Recovery Funding Board. Another 145 applications received earlier this year are now being assessed for eligibility. With a two-year budget of \$2 million, program managers expect to fund about one-third of the projects.

Scott’s neighbors were skeptical when he told them they had received financial help from the state. “They didn’t believe me,” Scott said. “But we got it done this summer, right off the bat. We got a new bridge and we’ll never have a flooding problem again. I don’t think we could have gotten our road fixed without this program. It’s an outstanding program.”

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