

## **Washington State funds Recreation Trail Purchase in 2008 and then State pays to Demolish Recreation Trail in 2015 for Habitat Restoration**

**Synopsis:** Washington State spent \$817,107.49 to acquire an historic railroad land corridor in Yakima County during 2008-2010 for the William O. Douglas Heritage Trail. In 2015, additional State funds will be used to demolish that railroad facility, eliminating a key trail link and preventing public recreational use along Cowiche Creek.

**History:** In 1913, this railroad branch line along Cowiche Creek was a critical transportation link to bring fruit and other agricultural products to market from newly planted orchards and farms in the fertile areas near Tieton and Cowiche. A century ago, the "Tieton District" was considered one of the most productive farming areas in the nation. The North Yakima & Valley Railway made it possible to realize huge benefits from the Bureau of Reclamation's Yakima Irrigation Project, which transformed a half-million acres of sagebrush into one of the richest agricultural areas in the nation. The railroad replaced an old wagon road, and before that, a Native American travel route. A largely intact, five mile section of this historic rail line exists from the mouth of the Cowiche Canyon to Weikel in Yakima County, and many of the original bridges, abutments, and constructed railroad prism are still there. The entire railroad corridor has been found eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

The City of Yakima and Yakima County adopted Trail Plans showing the William O. Douglas Trail on this historic railroad corridor along Cowiche Creek. State RCO funds were matched with WSDOT transportation enhancement funds totaling \$1.9 Million for this designated "State-Wide Significant Heritage Trail." Now Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group (MCFEG) and Cowiche Canyon Conservancy (CCC) propose to demolish this state-funded trail connection, upsetting a pre-approved, inter-agency trail plan that has long been in place.

In 1985, CCC was formed for the "protection" of the railroad and to "preserve that land for recreation." In 2014, CCC voted to remove part of the railroad trail and convert the recreation lands to fish habitat. CCC received state funds to help coordinate removal of the trail. CCC's Director is also a voting member of the State Recreation Funding Board.

**Current Situation:** The existing rail-trail facility is four feet above the Cowiche Creek floodplain, and it works well for a low-impact, public recreational trail. MCFEG and CCC plan to use State RCO funds to demolish the historic railroad bridge abutments and elevated grade. This will eliminate the only feasible creek crossing for the trail and preclude public access to Lower Cowiche Creek. After using state funds to **enable** public recreation along Lower Cowiche Creek, how can additional State funds now be used to **destroy** that same public recreational access?

The use of State funds to demolish a recreation rail is contrary to Governor Jay Inslee's Executive Order 14-01 directing state agencies to "increase public outdoor recreation opportunities." Worse yet, the Fish & Wildlife Dept. bypassed the usual public approval process and has twice refused to allow trail advocates and Yakima County citizens to participate in the environmental review process. And the Dept. of Archaeology & Historic Preservation is "extremely concerned" that fish and wildlife agencies have "failed to properly follow consultation procedures" under the National Historic Preservation Act.

State Government statutes and accounting rules require publicly-funded facilities to be used for their intended public purpose -- here to enable public recreation access to Cowiche Creek. Will MCFEG and WDFW pay back state recreation and transportation funds used to buy the Heritage Trail?

The right hand of state government does not know what the left hand is doing — one agency funds the purchase of the recreation trail while another agency funds the destruction of that trail. This is a complete breakdown in inter-agency communications and a lack of transparency regarding the expenditure of state funds for conflicting purposes.

For more info: email [williamodouglastrail@gmail.com](mailto:williamodouglastrail@gmail.com)

Washington State Agency Sources:

- Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO), "*Lower Cowiche Creek Restoration*" SRFB Project No. 11-1320, Grant Sponsor: Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group and Grant Partner: Cowiche Canyon Conservancy
- Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO), "*William O. Douglas Trail Connections*" WWRP Project No. 06-1851C, 2006, Grant Sponsor: City and County of Yakima
- Department of Transportation (WSDOT), "*William O. Douglas Heritage Trail*" SAFETEA-LU Federal Transportation Enhancement Grants, 2006-2007, Grant Sponsors: William O. Douglas Trail Foundation and City of Yakima
- Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW), SEPA DNS # 14-030 (June 5, 2014)
- Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation (DAHP), Letter to USF&WS (September 11, 2014)

Historic Preservation Source:

- Cowiche and Naches Branches Historic District, Northern Pacific Railway & North Yakima & Valley Railway, Artifacts Architectural Consulting (September 2014)

Cowiche Canyon Conservancy Source:

- Minutes of October 13, 2014 Board of Directors meeting

## Vicinity Map For Floodplain Restoration—Cowiche Creek



Proposed Project location near Yakima

