

WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS HERITAGE TRAIL segment slated for DEMOLITION by State Fish & Wildlife Dept. and Mid-Columbia Fisheries Group

Transportation Enhancement grants and State-appropriated trail funds were used to acquire an historic railroad corridor to bridge a key "missing link" in the 80-mile Heritage Trail between Yakima and Mt. Rainier. But now State Fish & Wildlife funds will be used to demolish the historic railroad bridge abutments and elevated grade that is the only feasible place for a trail bridge across Lower Cowiche Creek.

After State Transportation Dept. funds were used to **enable** public recreational access to Lower Cowiche Creek, how can State Fish & Wildlife Dept. funds be used to **remove** that same public recreational access? The right hand of State government is unaware of what the left hand is doing, and they operate at cross-purposes.

And the use of public funds to demolish part of the designated Heritage Trail of "State-Wide Significance" is contrary to Governor Jay Inslee's recent Executive Order 14-01 directing state agencies to "increase public outdoor recreation opportunities." Worse yet, the State Fish & Wildlife Dept. in Olympia bypassed the usual public approval process and has refused to reopen the process to allow trail advocates and Yakima County citizens to participate in the environmental review process for "Lower Cowiche Creek Restoration."

Floodplain regulatory agencies will allow the replacement of bridges on existing berms that are above the 100-year flood level, but will not allow installation of new structures below the 100-year flood elevation. For example in similar situations, regulatory agencies have previously allowed construction of replacement trail bridges on existing historic abutments at Snow Mountain Ranch and at Lower Cowiche Creek. Yakima Sunrise Rotary Club installed one of these trail bridges as a community service project. The Yakima Greenway Trail is located on elevated dikes above the river floodplain.

The existing railroad corridor, which was purchased for the trail, is four feet above the Cowiche Creek floodplain, and it works well for a recreational trail crossing. A 2010 City of Yakima Engineering letter says the City selected this grant-funded bridge abutment site as the only feasible trail bridge crossing. Demolishing the railroad bridge abutments eliminates the only feasible creek crossing for the trail and precludes public recreational access across Lower Cowiche Creek.

Government accounting rules require publicly-funded property to be used for their intended governmental purpose -- here to enable public recreation access to Cowiche Creek. Will the State Fish & Wildlife Dept. pay back the public transportation and trail funds used to buy the trail corridor? Transportation Enhancement grants were awarded to both the City of Yakima and the William O. Douglas Trail Foundation for this coordinated trail connection project.

The William O. Douglas Trail Foundation is attempting to work with all parties to revise the project so trail continuity is maintained and fish habitat can be enhanced.

Demolition of the bridge abutments also may be contrary to restrictions on using federal or state funds to alter historic facilities. This 1913 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 areas in the nation, on a per acre basis. The North Yakima & Valley Railway made it possible to realize huge benefits from the Bureau of Reclamation's Yakima Irrigation Project one hundred years ago, 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, likely a Native American travel route.

Both the City of Yakima and Yakima County adopted Trail Plans showing the William O. Douglas Trail using this historic railroad corridor across and along Lower Cowiche Creek, but a key section of this publicly-funded rail-trail is now slated for demolition.