

WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS HERITAGE TRAIL segment slated for DEMOLITION by Mid-Columbia Fisheries Group

Synopsis: As a Rails-To-Trails project, \$817,107.49 in public grant funds were spent to acquire an historic railroad facility along Lower Cowiche Creek and to develop this "missing link" as a connecting trail segment of the William O. Douglas Trail. Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group (MCFEG) now plans to use federal and state funds to remove part of the 102 year old North Yakima & Valley Railway corridor, purchased in 2008 for use as a key link in the William O. Douglas Trail, and thereby precluding recreational trail access along Lower 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 Historic Register.

In 1985, Cowiche Canyon Conservancy (CCC) was formed for the "protection" of the railroad and to "preserve that land for recreation." In 2014, the CCC Board voted to support demolition of the railroad trail and bridge support structures, and CCC says there should be a trail on the road shoulder instead of using the railroad land already purchased for the trail. CCC believes the purchased recreation lands should be converted to fish habitat. CCC has received "project development funds" to help coordinate removal of the Rail-Trail.

In 2006-2007, the William O. Douglas Trail Foundation was awarded federal grant funding for this designated "State-Wide Significant Trail," and we coordinated matching public funds for the trail totaling \$1.9 Million. Mid-Columbia's proposal to demolish this grant-funded rail trail segment upsets a pre-approved trail plan that has long been in place. CCC proposes to substitute a road shoulder trail but the State prohibits road shoulder trails as unsafe.

Current Situation: MCFEG plans to use public recreation & conservation funds 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 public funds were used to **enable** public recreational access to Lower Cowiche Creek, how can additional public funds be used to **remove** that same public recreational access?

Floodplain regulatory agencies typically allow the replacement of bridges on existing structures that are above the 100-year flood level, but typically restrict installation of new structures in the floodplain. 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 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 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.

And the use of state funds to demolish part of the designated Heritage Trail of "State-Wide Significance" is contrary to Governor Jay Inslee's Executive Order 14-01 directing state agencies to "increase public outdoor recreation opportunities." Worse yet, the State Fish & Wildlife Dept. 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."

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

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

We are attempting to work with all parties to revise the project so trail continuity is maintained and fish habitat can be enhanced. The William O. Douglas Foundation wants fish and people to enjoy the Cowiche Creek at the same time.....this is a win-win situation!

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[Sources -- Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, SRFB Project No. 11-1320, Grant Sponsor: Mid-Columbia Fisheries Enhancement Group and Grant Partner: Cowiche Canyon Conservancy; Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office, WWRP Project No. 06-1851C, 2006; Washington Department of Transportation, SAFETEA-LU federal transportation enhancement grants, 2006-2007]