The Nature Conservancy
Protecting nature. Preserving life.™

Fisher Slough

Freshwater Tidal Marsh Restoration

Creating a more sustainable future for farmers and fish

Fisher Slough is a tidally influenced wetland and farmland complex in the southeast portion of the Skagit River delta, south of the town of Mount Vernon, Washington. The slough drains a 22 square mile watershed and is surrounded by prime farmland. The Nature Conservancy seeks to restore native plant communities, freshwater tidal marsh habitat and fish passage throughout the slough while increasing flood storage capacity. This project will demonstrate that restoration can benefit agriculture and serve as a community asset while also providing a better home for native species.

Restoring natural processes

Fisher Slough historically supported dynamic tidal and non-tidal wetlands. To claim land for agricultural purposes, tide gates and levees were installed decades ago. Today, the slough and its lower tributaries are confined and filled with invasive non-native plants; the historic alluvial fan has been eliminated; and natural flooding and tidal events are almost non-existent. The net results are a reduction in extent and diversity of wetlands, reduced accessibility for fish, degraded water quality and a reduction in flood storage capacity. By replacing antiquated tide gates, setting back levees and fixing complex drainage structures, The Nature Conservancy will restore 60 acres, creating vital habitat and allowing natural stream and tidal processes to work again.

Vital habitat for salmon

The Skagit River basin remains a salmon stronghold, and Fisher Slough contributes to that heritage: though heavily altered, it is one of the last significant freshwater tidal sloughs available to juvenile Chinook salmon as they move down the river. However, fish passage has been effectively blocked for decades in this system. By removing barriers to passage, The Nature Conservancy will open up many acres of marsh habitat for juvenile Chinook, as well as provide spawning access to 15 miles of tributary habitat for populations of Coho and chum salmon. Pink salmon, cutthroat and steelhead trout are also expected to benefit from this significant restoration action.

An investment in the future

The current structures and design at Fisher Slough are costly for local farmers, communities and the dike district to maintain. Tide gates and levees require frequent attention and repair. Floods damage fields and property. A complex drainage system serves as a bottleneck and inhibits effective management.

A goal of the Fisher Slough project is to design the restoration to improve system performance while minimizing the need for maintenance. The restoration will set back levees, which will improve area flood storage capacity and reduce the need to repair eroded levees, dredge tributary creeks or tend damaged fields.

This restoration project is a significant contribution to local and regional salmon recovery goals. The Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan, which calls for the restoration of several thousand acres of estuarine habitat, specifically references Fisher Slough. This restoration effort is also a component of the Three-Year Implementation Salmon Plan for the Skagit Basin 2008-2010, as developed by the Skagit Watershed Council.

The Fisher Slough project will restore 60 acres of native habitat (outlined in red). Current drainage ditches (solid green line) will be rerouted (dotted green line), allowing existing streams (blue) to flow more naturally through the slough.

Supporting local communities

The Skagit River delta is the heart of western Washington's agricultural community, home to a rich farming tradition. The Nature Conservancy supports this community and recognizes its essential role as a partner and steward of a sustainable natural heritage.

Fisher Slough is surrounded by farmland. When heavy rains fall on area lowlands, the Slough fills up quickly and floodwaters spill into neighboring fields. Restoring native wetland habitat and increasing flood storage capacity will protect productive farmland and provide greater certainty for area farmers.

Success at Fisher Slough will build partnerships and set a precedent that will generate opportunities for future restoration. The flood control and infrastructure challenges overcome here will inform other potential estuary restoration projects in the Skagit delta and beyond. Moreover, this project has the potential to break through past patterns of deadlock and adversarial struggle to achieve solutions that work.

This Fisher Slough restoration effort is the first of its kind on private land in Skagit County. Since its inception, this project has been a collaborative endeavor with community stakeholders, resulting in widespread support of the effort. By working together, the Conservancy and its partners hope to demonstrate that such habitat restoration will contribute to a sustainable agricultural tradition in the greater Skagit delta.

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