

From the President

By Bruce Freet



Bruce stands beside Day Creek on the Board Tour

The Board of Directors has been striving for several years to make the Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group more strategic, competitive, and diversified with its salmon habitat restoration projects. The staff completed its first Strategic Plan, and felt that it was so successful that they have created another ... the 2009 – 2012 Strategic Plan. As a part of this process, the staff is currently using a set of 15 criteria to revise its Focal Areas, ranking Skagit and Samish River tributaries by their potential value to salmon recovery.

Now, we are positioned to make a major step toward becoming one of the best fisheries enhancement groups in Washington. First, the building where our administrative office is located (407 Main Street, Mount Vernon) has been condemned for flood control, so we are taking this opportunity to co-locate our office, shop, and nursery. It will be the first time in our 19 year history that all of our operations are together. This will greatly **improve our staff communications and coordination**. If you are aware of any rental properties that would enable us to achieve this goal, please notify us. Second, we are re-organizing the restoration staff in order to capitalize upon the skills sets of our young, relatively new Restoration Technicians and to **be more scientific with a new Restoration Ecologist position**. Our goal with the Restoration Technicians is to develop their skills so that they can become project leads on certain restoration projects. At the same time, the new Restoration Ecologist will strengthen us as an organization to effectively restore more complex salmon nursery habitats such as side channels along the mainstem Skagit River or the estuaries in Skagit Bay and the adjacent San Juan Islands.

The timing for change is usually crucial, and our situation is no different! Combining our office, shop, and nursery coupled with strengthening our restoration abilities will enable the Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group to be more competitive for future salmon habitat restoration funds. And, a new federal funding source is in Congress. If passed and signed into law, the **Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act of 2009** (Senate Bill, S. 817, and House Bill, H.R. 2055) will establish a federal program to support the protection and restoration of a network of the healthiest remaining wild Pacific salmon ecosystems in the United States --- “Salmon Strongholds”. These salmon strongholds will provide core centers of salmon abundance, productivity, and genetic diversity. This Act reflects a basic principle of conservation biology: protect the best, first! Portions of the Skagit River watershed will surely qualify as salmon strongholds, and we want to be in a position to do the protection and restoration work.

The Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act of 2009 will:

- support public-private incentive-based efforts to maintain strong “seed” stocks;
- leverage private funding for cooperative conservation efforts;
- streamline the restoration process for incentive-based programs;
- enhance coordination among federal, state, and local governments, tribes, and non-profit organizations; and
- save billions of dollars in future restoration, stock rebuilding, and emergency funding, by making strategic investments in the highest value conservation actions.

Year in Review

By Ona Strikas

It still amazes me that my term with SFEG is rushing towards its end. In these past ten months, I have learned so much about engaging the public in the natural world, and the logistics of salmon restoration. I'm sure I will use this knowledge in my future adventures.

From my first week here, I was thrust head first into one of our busiest seasons. My fourth day of work, we held our spawner survey monitoring workshop, and only a few weeks later, I was leading a planting party when I hadn't planted a tree in over five years-and only a handful of trees at that. As fall came in full force, I learned how exciting it can be to work next to a river as volatile as the Skagit. As flood waters threatened, Perry recruited me to go with to rescue over 300 potted trees sitting dangerously close to the rushing waters at Ovenell.

I will always treasure the field days during my term, but I really enjoyed the independence of designing and executing lessons plans for Junior Stream Stewards, as well as for individual class presentations. Figuring how to make the light bulbs inside of students' brains become aglow was an enjoyable riddle to me.



Ona is instructing MVHS students at a tree planting

Working with volunteers in restoration, and seeing them appreciate the work we are doing to help salmon and the environment was the highlight of my term here. Those experiences, along with the connections gained, I will take with me wherever my life shall lead next. Heartfelt thanks to SFEG. I will miss all y'all!

Winters Creek Fish Passage Barrier Replaced with Bridge

By Kyle Koch



Barrier culverts being removed

Like a raging bull SFEG completed its first instream project of 2009 within four gorgeous, hot and sunny days in early July. The target site was a creek locally known as Winters Creek, a small tributary that flows into Morgan Creek in the Day Creek community. The project involved correcting a fish passage barrier located under a private driveway crossing just south of the South Skagit Highway. The site consisted of two small culverts, one of which was barely visible under sediment and brush, and allowed for just a muddy trickle of water through it. These small culverts were hardly enough to withstand events such as last January's flooding, and they were known to block passage of juvenile and adult Chinook, coho, cutthroat and possibly steelhead.

To correct the fish passage problem, the SFEG field technicians first cleared the pot-hole-ridden driveway of reed canary grass to allow the new bridge to be delivered, which was shipped fresh all the way from Oregon. Before construction Winters Creek was blocked off upstream and downstream of the culvert and de-watered. This allowed technicians to rescue dozens of coho, dozens more pacific giant salamanders and a plethora of macro-invertebrates from the site. Two excavators from Harkness Contracting Inc. removed the failing culverts in order to place the behemoth 40 foot by 13 foot bridge over the stream. The bridge was so big that it needed to be rolled on logs! While digging there was quite a bit of trash found and removed, including over 50 tires. Ironically the tires actually came in handy as they were used to line the new bridge allowing the excavators to cross it without damaging the wood and bolts. The bridge was actually set 4 feet above the existing driveway elevation in order to keep the pesky beavers, which are very active on Winters Creek, from blocking the stream. New sand and rock was delivered from the Day Creek and Clear Lake gravel pits in order to lead the driveway up to the new elevation.



Pacific giant salamander at Winters Creek restoration site

By Friday July 10th the bridge had been installed and the local residents seemed to be tickled pink by the project. After a few hours of cleanup the following Monday yet another successful SFEG instream project had been completed.

This fish passage problem was identified during a comprehensive inventory of the watershed completed in 1999 by Skagit System Cooperative. This inventory identified over 800 fish passage problems, of which 122 sites were ranked as a high priority for correction. The inventory identified the Winters Creek culverts as too small for the stream, creating a velocity barrier for juvenile and adult salmonids.

Correcting this fish passage barrier improves salmonid access to over 2 miles of previously isolated habitat. Based on field surveys, SFEG has determined that habitat upstream of the crossing consists of 799 sq m pool; 6,285 sq m riffle; 8,502 sq m pond/slough; and 658 sq m of cascade habitat. Morgan Creek is known to support



Restoration technician Neil Vargas and resident Bill Sharples atop completed bridge cooperation of local landowners. Funding for the project came through grants from the Salmon Recovery Funding Board and the WDFW's ALEA Volunteer Cooperative Grants.

Chinook salmon as well as coho and cutthroat. SFEG staff observed juvenile Chinook in 2006 confirming the use of the creek for rearing. The project builds on another fish passage project completed by SFEG 2.3 miles downstream at the mouth of Morgan Creek near Ross Island Slough in 2007.

SFEG would like to thank the landowner and long time member of the Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, Ken Evans, for enabling

this project to happen. Projects like these would not be possible without the generous

cooperation of local landowners. Funding for the project came through grants from the Salmon Recovery Funding Board and the WDFW's ALEA Volunteer Cooperative Grants.

Farewell to Perry

In July, SFEG bid farewell to Perry Welch our Project Manager for the last eight and half years. Perry resigned from his position with SFEG to pursue other opportunities as a natural resource biologist in the private sector in Bellingham. Perry is leaving SFEG on a high note after completing the Morgan Creek fish passage project on his last day on the job! When asked about his departure Perry said “I have had a great run at Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group and I continue to be committed to the mission of the organization. I have enjoyed working with all of you and hope to continue to collaborate with you in the future.” Perry will be missed by the organization and we wish him all the best in his new endeavors.

SFEG has an position opening for a restoration ecologist. Click [here](#) for the position description,



Perry standing with Sammy Salmon at Hansen Earth Day Planting

Hello Again

By Neil Vargas



Hello again. My name is Neil Vargas and I am the new Restoration Technician at SFEG. During my internship with Skagit Fisheries in 2006-2007, I became interested in farming and growing food for myself. This led me to central Washington to run a small organic vegetable farm with my girlfriend. Prior to my move to the farm, I embarked on a personal journey down the west coast to Los Angeles on my bicycle. Through my work

on the farm, I became more interested in Permaculture and building with natural materials. Permaculture is a philosophy or approach to designing human settlements and perennial agricultural systems that mimic the relationships found in natural systems. These ideas led me to a workshop in Southern India this last winter. I was in India for 2.5 months, half of that time devoted to studying permaculture and natural building. I live my life in pursuit of low-impact on the environment and sustainability.

It is wonderful to be back in NW Washington hiking, biking and working on growing my own food. I invite others to join me in those pursuits. I am glad to once again be working with SFEG and i look forward to meeting more of the people involved with our organization.

Adios

By Corinne Hughes



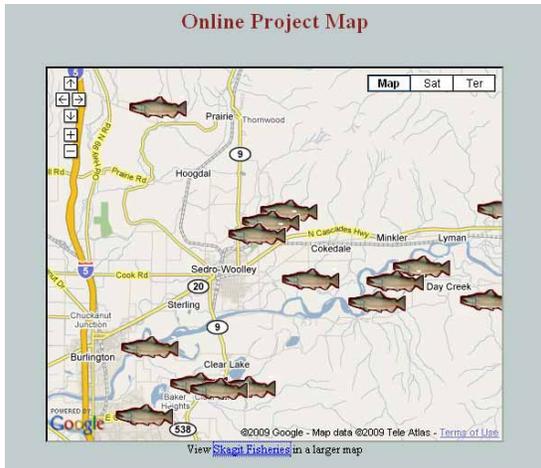
I first saw Skagit County on the way to my future home, Bellingham. It was love at first sight. Since then, I have spent the past two years working in this county. I was intimately introduced last year working on a crew for the Nature Conservancy surveying the Sauk and Skagit rivers for knotweed. This year, I've had more contact with the local community through volunteer events and, of course, more contact with the salmon! During one winter spawner survey, a barking dog approached the creek and frightened me. I lost my balance and my glasses! Suddenly, the dog was entering the cold water. As I screeched, a Coho jumped out of the water towards the dog, which ran away in fear and did not return. As if I don't already have enough reason to respect these amazing creatures! Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group gave me an opportunity to learn about salmon, the way nonprofit organizations function, research techniques, running a nursery and planning events for the community. Learning about the plight of salmon immensely influenced my life. I plan to return to school after this year for a degree in marine biology.

SFEG Restoration Project Map Online

By Ona Strikas

As part of AmeriCorps, each individual placement member is asked to complete an individual project that benefits the group that he or she works for and the community at large. To that end, I created an online project map that holds forty-six of our biggest projects and field sites, with more to come. Currently there are map sites from Thatcher Bay in the San Juans to Diobsud Creek near Newhalem. The project map is now linked on our website, and anyone can access it at www.skagitfisheries.org/map/. The intention

for this map is so the public can easily see and understand what SFEG does out in the field. Each site, when possible, has photos that pop up when you click on a site. Check out the photos below to see the map in action. Please use the map at your leisure, and let us know what you think!



This is what our map looks like at www.skagitfisheries.org/map/. If you click to view in a larger map it can redirect you to a much larger map space on Google maps.

-  [Berry Patch Creek](#)
Click here for detailed information on this
-  [Brickyard Creek](#)
Click here for detailed information on this
-  [Day Creek](#)
Click here for detailed information on the
-  [Diettrick Creek](#)
Click here for detailed information on this
-  [East Fork Nookachamps Creek](#)
Click here for detailed information on the
-  [Elysian Meadows](#)
Click here for more information on this project.
-  [Ennis Creek](#)
Click here for detailed information on the
-  [Finney Creek](#)
Click here for detailed information on the
-  [Gravel Creek](#)
Click here for detailed information on this
-  [Hansen Creek](#)
Click here for a historical brochure on this

On the large map view, this list will appear on the left-hand side. It is an easy way to find the exact project one is looking for by alphabetical search. By clicking on any of the site names, the map zooms in on that location and gives a callout picture



This is what our map looks like when one clicks on the Pringle Creek name or fish icon. The photo shows the new culvert that was installed at the site, as well as a link to a project description.

What's Happening in the Samish River anyway?

*Kurt Buchanan – SFEG Board member
Retired Fish Biologist*

If you monkey around in the Samish River during or after a rainstorm, wash your hands before eating. Always. The same is true for many of the tributary streams – Friday Cr., Thomas Cr., Swede Cr., Parsons Cr., Skarrup Cr., and an old friend – Bob Smith Creek. Ok, washing your hands before you eat is usually a good idea anyway, but what's the deal with the river, and its tributaries in particular? Fecal bacteria is the problem, bunches of it, gallons of it, and the various viruses and other pathogenic bacteria that go with it. Like E. coli. Yuck! And it's nothing new.



Samish River sign posted by Mrs. Russell's Allen students

There has been water quality sampling done in the Samish watershed since at least 1959. Prior to winter 2008/9, most water sampling was done on a regularly scheduled basis, and was not targeted on weather events. Sampling has been done by a wide range of organizations, not just volunteers. This changed in spring 2008. Routine sampling by Skagit County in April 2008 discovered water highly polluted with fecal bacteria entering Samish Bay during a rain event. The federal standard for surface waters is 100 fecal colonies/100 milliliters of surface water sampled. This is the safe level, above which waters are unsafe. The county's sampling found 17,000 FC/100 ml! County staff did more sampling throughout the spring, and continued finding very high fecal

counts. The State Health Dept. shut down commercial shellfish harvest in Samish Bay on a number of occasions, only re-opening the bay after the fecal plume had dissipated. The shellfish industry in the Bay is fairly large scale, going back to a time before Statehood. Such shutdowns, and product recall, are costly to this industry. County staff came to Stream Team volunteers (organized by Skagit Conservation District and the Padilla Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve) to see if we could sample throughout the Samish watershed, particularly targeting storm events. So, some of us have been collecting water samples throughout the watershed, processing the samples in the Padilla Bay Reserve's volunteer lab, and counting the bacterial colonies grown from those water samples. We inform both the County, and State Health Dept. of our results, and they use the data to help manage the shellfish closures. We have been finding out what happens in the Samish River watershed over the past winter, rain or shine. And it's not pretty!

Winter or spring, when it rains at least 0.3 inches in the Samish River watershed, most sample stations are well in excess of the clean water standard of 100 FC/100 ml. When it hasn't rained for awhile, the river is usually within standards. When it has rained, and we find very high fecal numbers, a few days later when the rain has stopped and the river drops in flow, the river cleans up fast. The fecal issues in the main river seem to start downstream of the Highway 9 bridge north of Sedro Woolley. Even during high rainfall, river samples taken up here are usually well within the clean water standard. By the time

the river is sampled downstream near Parson's Creek Road, most often the fecal content has jumped into the 100's or 1,000's, and continues to rise throughout the river basin. Most often, there are significant increases in the stretch from Parson's Creek Road to Grip Road, and from Grip Road to Old 99. In May, near the mouth of the river at Thomas Road bridge, there was a count of 9000 FC just after a rainy day. Many tributary streams are no better. Upstream reaches of most tributaries come out of forested watersheds, and the fecal numbers are very low. Once these creeks have gotten to our homes, and pastures, the fecal numbers jump up fast. Many creeks sampled are also in the 1,000's near their mouths. An example of this is our old friend Bob Smith Creek, SFEG's first stream restoration project (1991). This small tributary originates just north of Bow Hill Road, and dumps into the Samish River just below the Old 99 bridge. The creek is stuffed with chum salmon, and coho, and cutthroat trout. During May 2009 storms, fecal numbers at the upstream end were within standards; near its downstream end it was 7,500 FC! And you can just about see from one end of that watershed to the other. What is causing this huge jump in fecals? The only sources appear to be a few homes, and livestock. It should be easy to figure out the sources, and to solve them. The regulatory agencies involved are Skagit County, and Department of Ecology. They have not yet engaged. Will there be political will to clean up the pollution? Should SFEG play a role in cleaning up the problems in this very small watershed, and in the larger Samish watershed? SFEG started in Bob Smith Creek, I think it only makes sense that we continue what we began, and once again make this creek good for the people who live there, and good for the fish. Tell us what you think.

Please join us Saturday, September 26 for a watershed tour of the Samish. This all day tour will include stops at SFEG restoration sites, Stream Team water quality monitoring sites, salmon viewing (if we're lucky) and will also include lunch. Reserve your seat in the van no later than Wednesday September 23 at 360-336-0172 or ldegrace@skagitfisheries.org.