

Marin Independent Journal

November 9, 2009

Marin Voice: Saving coho takes tough action

By Jeff Miller

The Center for Biological Diversity, a national conservation group, has been participating in the Salmon Enhancement Plan process for San Geronimo Valley because of the regional and global significance of coho salmon in Lagunitas Creek.

Central California coast coho are listed as endangered by both state and federal governments and are on the brink of extinction. Only 500 to 1,000 wild coho now return to spawn most years in the entire central coast.

The Lagunitas Creek watershed is home to the largest and most important coho run in the state, and half the salmon spawning in the watershed occurs in the San Geronimo Valley.

Coho are in their perilous condition primarily because of the historic legacy of dam building and logging. In the Lagunitas Creek watershed, five dams cut off salmon from much of their historic spawning and rearing habitat.

Now, the cumulative impacts of our expanding infrastructure - the hundreds of homes, roads, wells, and septic systems - contribute to sedimentation of spawning beds, dewatering of tributaries and degraded water quality.

The most important factor for coho survival is protecting and enhancing the few watersheds that still have the potential to support the species.

The West Marin community can help prevent the extinction of our iconic salmon, a common asset of

incalculable regional, economic, spiritual and ecological values. Maintaining and restoring good instream habitat conditions will be a major factor in helping salmon persist in the face of drought and changing climate and ocean conditions.

The draft Salmon Enhancement Plan is an important step toward understanding current conditions, improving land- and water-use policies and encouraging best management practices within the creek corridor. It proposes incentives for landowners to implement voluntary actions such as septic upgrades and habitat restoration.

Contrary to well-publicized fear-mongering, it does not recommend mandatory inspections, require existing houses, gardens or fences to be removed, or prevent landowners from using creekside areas for low-impact activities.

A reality check for the vocal and histrionic property-rights advocates: The plan is in no way Draconian and does not involve "takings" of private-property rights. Much of it involves compliance with existing regulations.

However, if salmon are to survive, new development, structures and activity along the creek that can affect stream habitat must be regulated. The county must implement science-based ordinances with real enforcement ability to effectively protect coho habitat and the riparian zone.

The county's buffer zone should extend well beyond the

recommended 35 feet to be scientifically and legally defensible. The Center for Biological Diversity will be monitoring the county's progress to ensure a strong salmon protection plan.

In the anti-regulatory climate whipped up in the valley, it is important to note that every significant protection for endangered species in this country was won and protected through litigation and/or pressure on public agencies.

There would be no coho remaining at all if not for the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, logging regulations, pesticide restrictions and creek-protection ordinances. Numerous federal, state, county and local entities have environmental laws and common-sense regulations that limit development near creeks or in floodplains.

SPAWN should be commended for its tireless education, restoration and advocacy work, and for being the catalyst for the salmon-enhancement plan now being considered. Without its actions the county would have approved a deficient general plan that did not give coho a fighting chance.

Marin can and should lead the way in salmon protection and implement a plan that not only minimizes harm to salmon but actively promotes coho recovery. Our actions could prevent coho from blinking out of our lives in the near future.

Jeff Miller is a West Marin resident and a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity in San Francisco.