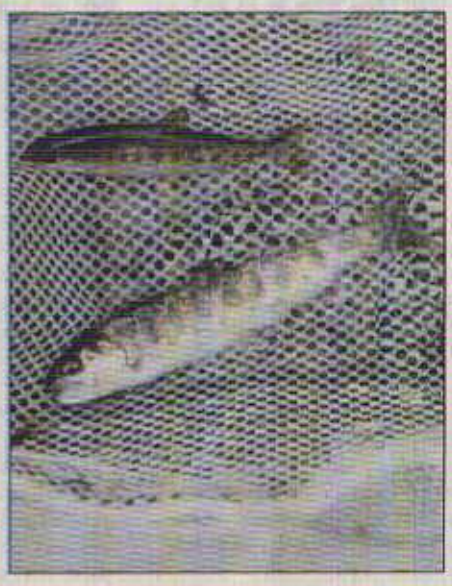
Clark County

One big trout in Trout Creek dodges the net



Steelhead trout like these juveniles captured in Trout Creek will gain 15 miles of upstream habitat with the removal of Hemlock Dam.

Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Snorkeler Kyle Marten and others try to net an elusive adult steelhead Monday in Trout Creek above Hemlock Dam. Fish above the dam were being moved downstream in preparation for piping the stream around the dam until it's demolished. The 20-inch fish got away.

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Team preparing for dam removal pauses to pursue a real lunker

By KATHIE DURBIN
Columbian staff writer

STABLER — The drama that played out Monday in a drawn-down tributary of the Wind River turned into the ultimate fish-that-got-away yarn.

The fish in question, a 20-inch steelhead trout, lurked in a murky pool of Trout Creek, part of a stretch that is being drained in preparation to demolish Hemlock Dam.

The 1930s-era concrete dam, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps, is being torn down to improve habitat for a Lower Columbia River steelhead run that has been listed as federally threatened since 1998.

Trout Creek was once a natural factory for production of wild summer steelhead, with a thousand or more returning each year to spawn in its upper reaches. But the dam with its primitive fish ladder blocked both upstream and downstream passage, severely depleting the run. In recent years, the number of returning steelhead has dropped to double digits.

For nearly a decade, the U.S. Forest Service has been laying plans to remove the 26-foot-high dam, which once stored water for the irrigation of conifer seedlings at the nearby Wind River Nursery and produced a small amount of hydropower. The Forest Service nursery closed in 1997; in recent years, the dam's only function was to back up a shallow 16-acre lake popular with residents of the Carson area.

On July 1, the Forest Service got the go-ahead to begin in-stream work in Trout Creek to "de-water" the construction site.

But before the creek could be drained, there was the matter of removing its fish — mainly steelhead fry and smolts, along with a few resident trout, sculpins and crawdads.

Beginning late last week, fish biologists and volunteers using electroshock wands captured the fish with nets and carefully weighed, measured and tagged each one before trucking them in coolers to a point below the dam for release. Crews captured 300 fish last week. Fish relocation was scheduled to wrap up Monday.

On Monday morning, four 250-horsepower pumps began sucking Trout Creek into 2-foot-diameter pipes at a point several hundred yards above the dam. By midmorning, most of the creek was flowing downstream in the diversion pipes and spilling into a canyon below the dam, about a quarter-mile away.

But then a glitch in the plan developed — in the shape of that 20-inch adult steelhead. The fish had arrived from downstream and had eluded the nets. Biologists speculated that he — everyone referred to the fish as "he" — was hiding beneath a large steel plate below the pumps.

Joe Zendt of Yakama Nation Fisheries, from left, Mark Doulos of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Carrie Munz of the U.S. Geological Service electroshock fish in Trout Creek above Hemlock Dam. The fish are temporarily stunned, netted and moved below the dam.

The pumps were turned off to avoid sucking the fish in. The water level began to rise.

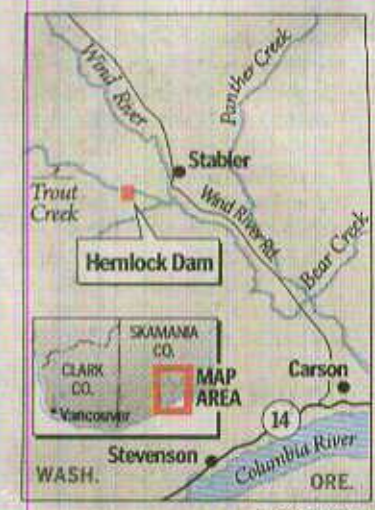
"This operation was not supposed to happen," said Bengt Coffin, the Forest Service project leader on the $2 million Hemlock Dam demolition. The project threatened to fall behind schedule.

Nonetheless, he decided to deploy his crew for an all-out mission to capture the fish.

A small army of biologists and volunteers fanned out along the banks of the pool and atop big sandbags set up to block fish passage downstream. Others were deployed upstream to hold a long channel-spanning seine net.

Coffin asked if anyone had snorkeling equipment. Kyle Marten, a fish biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, was summoned.

Coffin then consulted with Ian Jezorek, another USGS fish biologist.



The Columbian

"The easiest thing would be to lower the water," Jezorek said.

"Would the fish be attracted to it or run from it?" Coffin asked. "The pumps create a

DAM, *back page*

Study that says Snake dams don't stifle fis

By ERIK ROBINSON
Columbian staff writer

New research suggests that ocean-bound salmon forced to pass eight dams — including four on the lower Snake River — appear to fare no worse early in their life at sea than salmon crossing only four dams on the Columbia River.

The lead researcher said the study bolsters the case for leaving the Snake River dams in place.

"The farther out from Bonneville, and therefore the later in time, the more tenuous becomes the argument that the Snake River dams are causing the poor survival of Snake River salmon," said David Welch, president of Kintama Research Corp. in Nanaimo, B.C.

However, other fishery scientists strongly criticized the report as severely lacking in scientific rigor. Similar criticism dogged a study last year in which Welch found comparable survival rates for fish migrating the dammed Columbia and the undammed Fraser River in Canada.

"The problems and limitations of these Welch analyses are so extensive as to be pretty much unusable," said Michele DeHart, director of the Fish Passage Center in Portland.

"They've drawn some pretty strong conclusions prematurely from only one year of data," added Howard Schaller, project leader of the Columbia River fisheries office for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Vancou

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that case, Howsley commissioners would y have shifted their call more industrial land to state 5 near Ridgefield, rea local politicians have ed the "Discovery Cor- ."

think the focus would ack on the Discovery idor and maybe the land nd 219th" Street, Hows- aid.

HAEL ANDERSEN: 360- 4508 or michael.andersen@ bian.com.

Dam:

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heck of a suction. There's a vortex in there."

"Right now it's too deep," Jezorek said. "He'll just circle around us."

Coffin gave the word, and crews turned on two of the pumps. The water, chest-high, dropped rapidly as the motors whirred.

"All just for one fish," Coffin quipped.

After a few minutes, the contractor overseeing the pumping called out, "Hey, that's as low as you're going to get it."

The pumps fell silent. Kyle Marten waded out into the pool with a dip net and pulled on his mask and snorkel. He began paddling around the pool's surface, face down, surveying its murky depths.

No one spoke.

Marten emerged. Nothing. He paddled some more, searching around the edges of the steel plate. He spotted some fry, but saw no sign of the big steelhead.

"We could keep pumping and you could look upstream," someone suggested.

Coffin considered. "Well, at some point we've got to call it," he said.

He checked to make sure everyone was out of the water. Then he made his call, ordering the pumps turned on again.

They'll continue running 16 hours a day most of the summer, while crews dredge 50,000 cubic yards of sediment, demolish the dam with jackhammers, rebuild the stream channel along its historic location, and revegetate the banks. The project will open 15 miles of upstream habitat to summer steelhead.

James Dean, the contractor on the job, watched Monday's scene with bemusement. Asked if he'd ever seen a job shut down for a fish, he said, "Not like this."

He chose to be optimistic about the steelhead's fate.

"It's a big fish," he said. "He's strong enough. I'm sure he's going to survive anyway."

STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Hemlock Dam, built in the 1930s, has been a major barrier to migration for a once-abundant run of summer steelhead on Trout Creek, a tributary of the Wind River. The dam will be demolished this summer and the creek's original course rebuilt.

Salmon:

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dams over recent years has reduced the number of ocean-bound juveniles killed as they pass over spillways or dive through turbines. Yet the proportion of Snake River wild and long enough to return to spawn.

Welch wanted to test the theory.

Researchers measured two groups of fish in 2006. They inserted acoustic tags in a total of 794 spring chinook raised in hatcheries, half from the Yakima River basin and half from the Snake River in Idaho. Then they waited.

Ultimately, a little more than

The study acknowledged that the proportion of Snake River spring chinook returning to spawn as adults is only about a fifth of the Yakima River spring chinook. Something is killing more of the Snake River fish, but Welch argues it may be attributable to different migration patterns within the ocean.

"Most salmon biologists, because of their freshwater train-

on a miniscule sample size, the fish were released at different times, and the study assumes both groups were detected equally in the ocean. Further, the relatively large size of the transmitters forced researchers to skew the study toward larger smolts that may not be representative of imperiled wild-spawning salmon. At about 8 percent of the fish's body weight, DeHart