Ground broken on Freshwater estuary restoration effort

Ten years in the making, salmon and salt marsh project under way

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A project to revive some of the old backwater fish habitat along Freshwater Slough — a project a decade in the making — is finally under way.

The first dirt was moved Tuesday in the effort to rebuild a small portion of the estuary of Freshwater Creek. The important Humboldt Bay salmon stream’s lower reaches have long been diked to make farmland, and biologists believe it’s missing the old salt marsh and back channels salmon use to avoid high winter flows and to feed and grow.

The Northcoast Regional Land Trust acquired 54 acres from Freshwater Farms in 2005. It has now begun the process of restoring tidal action to 29 acres, and improving habitat on 4,500 square feet of Wood Creek, which runs into the slough on the property.

“Even though it’s a small project, it’s hugely symbolic,” said Don Allen, co-director of the Redwood Community Action Agency’s Natural Resources Services.

The highly visible property along Myrtle Avenue to the west of Freshwater Corners will, over the next two weeks, undergo a transformation. Four old slough channels will be excavated to allow brackish and tidal water to enter them. A berm along Wood Creek will be removed, and finally a tide gate will be removed to allow tides to run a short distance upstream.

Some of the soil from the channels will be used to build mounds meant to protrude out of the tidal marsh being recreated. Native salt marsh plants like silverweed, salt grass and tufted hair grass will be planted in February.

On Tuesday, a Hooven and Co. excavator peeled up lyme grass’s sedge, carefully placing it on a tarp while Rick Storre of

FRESHWATER: At finish, a salmon refuge

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Freshwater Farms looked on. Freshwater Farms will place these in pots to be ready for replanting in the spring, and will provide an amazing 46,000 plants total.

“These guys deserve a pat on the back for making it happen,” Storre said of the land trust and RCAA.

It was a long, arduous process to design and permit the project, and the cost to do that is likely more than what it will take to actually build it. Despite the slow process, land trust project manager Ryan Wells was appreciative of the cooperation that has led to this stage.

“It’s been a good, collaborative effort to get this going,” Wells said.

Once it’s done, the hope is that salmon, especially coho salmon, will find refuge from high winter flows and grow on insects attracted to the salt marsh in summer. While it’s just a small area, it is a portion of the old salt marsh that has long been missing around Humboldt Bay, Wells said.

The main part of the project is expected to take two weeks.

The land trust is inviting the public to see the final product on Sept. 13 at 10 a.m. It’s asking those interested to RSVP to 822-2242.

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