

This is KPTZ 91.9FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Nigel O'Shea bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, April 30, 2025.

Heading south from Chimacum on either Center Road or Highway 19, travelers are treated to bucolic landscapes that suggest healthy streams and fertile, productive forest and farmland. But under this surface, the actual health of these Chimacum Creek valleys is more tenuous than it might appear. The days when Chimacum Creek supported thriving runs of coho and chum, salmon, steelhead and trout are a distant memory.

A proliferation of reed canary grass has blocked water flows into waterways, causing flooding on hundreds of acres of once highly productive farmland. The grass was introduced as forage for cattle, but now there are few, if any, cattle in the watershed. It can reach heights of over six feet and form mats of rhizomes, stems, and leaves across streams and ditches, choking the flow of water and creating challenges for adult and juvenile fish migration. It also robs the water of oxygen as it decomposes, resulting in lethal conditions for fish. In many areas, seasonal flooding now extends well into the growing season.

The Jefferson County Conservation District (JCCD), in collaboration with local agencies, farmers, and other landowners, is developing a comprehensive drainage management and improvement plan for the Chimacum Creek watershed. This plan aims to balance agricultural needs with ecological restoration, considering strategies such as reactivating the drainage district, creating a new management entity, or continuing with individual landowner maintenance.

The main branch of Chimacum Creek runs parallel to Center Road and is commonly referred to as West Chimacum Creek, while East Chimacum Creek roughly parallels Highway 19. Agriculture thrived in these valleys for just a generation or two following major alterations in the natural drainage system, including channelization of Chimacum Creek, excavation of many miles of drainage ditches, and installation of miles of subsurface drainage. The vast majority of the drainage system alterations were undertaken by the Chimacum Drainage District, which was created in 1919, but has been dormant since 1974.

The grass problem is compounded by native plants and trees that were planted alongside the creek for the past 30 years, according to Eric Kingfisher, Director of Stewardship and Resilience with the Jefferson County Land Trust. The North Olympic Salmon Coalition started these plantings 30 years ago to provide shade and better habitat for the stream, with the Jefferson County Conservation District (JCCD), managed by Joe Holtrop. Holtrop said, "Unfortunately, these plantings, especially the ones with a lot of willow, attracted beaver. They moved in, ate plantings and built dams, which resulted in more flooding, sometimes drowning many acres of established riparian plantings."

Most reed canary grass removal has been limited to a handful of properties, as it has been largely paid for or performed by individual landowners. However, in 2020, JCCD received grant funding from the Washington State Conservation Commission to provide cost-share assistance for its removal. Five miles of stream channel across 14 properties was cleared of the grass with an excavator attachment specially designed for removing reed canary grass. The project successfully improved stream flow and reduced flooding; however, one year after the treatment, the grass was growing back into the stream channel.

When Heidi Eisenhour started looking into the watershed problems during her first term as a Jefferson County commissioner in 2020 through multiple meetings, surveys and focus groups with area residents, she and the other commissioners gained a deeper understanding of the problems and the effects on the farms, ecology, and landowners, and that the uncoordinated care and maintenance dramatically altered the watershed's natural processes. Eisenhour said, "A healthy majority of the residents of the Chimacum Drainage District who

responded to our March survey were supportive of developing a coordinated plan.” The degree to which landowners are currently affected and would benefit from certain solutions varies widely, presenting a challenge to fairly appropriating financial responsibility. Kingfisher acknowledges this challenge, and both he and Eisenhower float the possibility of a tiered system of taxation, where landowners who would benefit most would be assessed a higher tax amount than others.

Reactivation of the drainage district is the most commonly discussed solution. Eisenhower will meet with the Conservation District on May 13 to determine the feasibility of its reactivation. Alternatively, a new Flood Control District zone or possibly Watershed Improvement District might be formed according to Holtrop and Eisenhower. A third, and apparently less desired approach, would be the continued management of the system by individual landowners. Reporting by Scott France.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and 5 Tuesday through Thursday, partnering on Wednesday to bring you stories from the *Jefferson County Beacon*. This is Nigel O’Shea. Thanks for listening.