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\$5.5M to help save salmon

The grant money will go toward habitat restoration projects around the county.

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Herald Writer

Efforts to save habitat for the endangered chinook salmon are getting a huge infusion of cash.

Snohomish County is the second-largest recipient of the \$42.8 million going out statewide. Skagit County got the most. The state Salmon Recovery Funding Board announced the awards this month.

Some funds are headed to a controversial project to restore habitat on Smith Island in the Snohomish River estuary. Other portions are slated for the Stillaguamish River basin and Port Susan Bay.

"The rivers in Snohomish County have the second-largest population of chinook salmon in the Puget Sound," said Susan Zemek, spokeswoman for the funding board. "If we're going to recover salmon from the brink of extinction, this is an incredibly important area."

Skagit County has the largest

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Salmon:

Boost for restoration projects

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number of chinook, also called king salmon, in the Puget Sound region.

Grants for Snohomish County projects total about \$5.5 million. The work is being done by the county, the Stillaguamish Indian Tribe, the Tulalip Tribes, the Stilly-Snohomish Fisheries Enhancement Task Force, the Nature Conservancy and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The recovery board chose the projects after reviews by local panels of scientists and community members.

"We're spending the money where it's going to save the most fish," Zemek said.

The Snohomish County projects aim to create more habitat by reconnecting flood plains, side channels and marshes that have been

cut off from the Snohomish and Stillaguamish rivers. The work involves replanting creek banks with native species, clearing sediment, fixing culverts and removing levees. That should give the fish places to rest, hide from predators and spawn.

The projects are possible because of cooperation between the county, tribal governments, businesses and sport fishermen, County Councilman Dave Somers said.

It's a topic Somers knows well, because he spent 18 years as a salmon habitat biologist with the Tulalip Tribes before getting elected to public office. Still, he cautioned that the efforts might not be enough.

"The amount of funding compared to what the scientists say we need is probably well short of what we should be doing," he said.

"We just hope we can keep the momentum going."

The federal government put several populations of salmon on the Endangered Species list in 1991. The Salmon Recovery Funding Board, formed to distribute state and federal money set aside to address the population declines, has awarded nearly \$404 million since 2000.

The latest funding includes \$1.5 million to restore 400 acres of tidal marsh on Smith Island between Everett and Marysville. That's part of a larger effort to restore chinook habitat in the Snohomish River estuary. The undertaking has generated friction with the farming community because it means the loss of land that has been used for agriculture for more than a century.

"It's a very big policy issue and it's not going to go away and we need to solve it," Somers said.

To address the conflict, Somers came up with a plan to map prime farmland and fish habitat areas. The idea received the county's Agricultural Advisory Board's approval. Now, Somers said he's having council staff work on ways to pay for the plan and to have a mediator sort out disputes between the two camps.

The new recovery grants support 12 habitat projects in Snohomish County.

"We have a responsibility to protect our region's ecology and cultural heritage, and we can only do that by working together," County Executive Aaron Reardon said in a press release. "These projects strike a balance between the need to protect salmon and a desire to maintain a high quality of life for our residents."

Skagit County efforts are getting \$5.8 million.

Learn more

For more on salmon-recovery grants, go to the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office Web site, www.rco.wa.gov. Look on the right-hand side of the page for "State Announces \$42.8 Million in Grants for Salmon Recovery."