Fixing the flow

By Mark Freeman
Mail Tribune

EAGLE POINT — A meandering side channel and a row of bank-fortifying root wads finally have helped a stretch of Little Butte Creek shed its lingering hangover from the New Year’s Day flood of 1997.

A $255,000 restoration project that was mostly completed last summer has taken hold on this stretch of creek outside of Eagle Point and created a more fish-friendly habitat while reducing bank erosion during rising water times like this week’s rains.

A side channel choked with non-native canary grass is flowing again, and three artificial channels now connect it to the mainstem creek, providing new places for wild juvenile coho salmon to escape the rolling creek during freshets.

Also a series of large trees pile-driven into the bank with their root wads jutting into the creek now fortify the bank and re-create the stream meander damaged by the flood 22 years ago.

This week’s rains created enough runoff to show that the newly reconstituted Little Butte Creek is back and better off than it has been for decades. “After the first few rains earlier this year, this side channel was just standing water,” said Alexis Larsen, project manager for the Rogue River Watershed Council, which spearheaded the work on city of Eagle Point land.

“Let’s face it, this is still a little bit of a work in progress,” Larsen said. “We will need more root wads to completely fortify the creek.”

Lower Little Butte Creek has been anything but cool fun for its denizens since the 1997 New Year’s Day flood tore through its banks and set the creek on a collision course with nearby Antelope Creek.

Since then, the creek has cut a tight dog-leg right on the property and has systematically scoured a large cut bank, with barely 100 yards of ground remaining to keep Little Butte from flowing into lower Antelope Creek.

If that occurred, it would overtax Antelope Creek with dirty water and overwhelm culverts under roads, Larsen said. As Little Butte Creek continued to eat away at that bank, the extra sediment further dirties a stream already over acceptable sediment loads.

That created poor habitat for threatened wild coho salmon in the creek, which is considered a key cog in restoring wild coho habitat in the upper Rogue River Basin.

photo JAMIE LUSCH / MAIL TRIBUNE

Alexis Larsen, project manager with the Rogue River Watershed Council, walks along a restoration project on Little Butte Creek Friday.

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Restoration project helps Little Butte Creek shed effects from 1997 flood

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Little Butte Creek flows into the Rogue less than a mile upstream of the intake where the city of Medford draws Rogue water in summer for municipal use.

The new main log structures not only slow flows and protect the bank but also create complex habitat for wild juvenile coho that have to slug it out through an entire winter here before heading to sea as smolts.

The side channel does much of the same, giving the creek back its meander.

Though operational, the project is not done, Larsen said.

Crews also have manually cut a massive plantation of non-native Himalayan blackberries that will be replaced by native plants and grasses later this year, she said.

The $255,000 project was funded primarily by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board and joined with a grant from a partnership of local and federal agencies that provide drinking water in the region. In-kind donations also come from the city of Eagle Point, the federal Bureau of Reclamation and the Medford Water Commission.

Both OWEB and the drinking water partnership in late 2016 helped fund the $70,000 study and design work done last year, Larsen said. Several other government and nonprofit agencies contributed to the project, she said.

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