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For more information, please contact Doug Kern, Director of Conservation at Mendocino Land Trust (707) 962-0470 or dkern@mendocinolandtrust.org

Habitat Restoration Project Yields Unprecedented Results for Coho Salmon

Coho habitat expanded after four years of restoration work on James Creek in Mendocino County

Scientists and conservationists are thrilled to report the return of spawning coho salmon to the upper reaches of a tributary of Big River, thanks to a four-year habitat restoration project led by Mendocino Land Trust in partnership with California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and Jackson Demonstration State Forest.

Initial post-restoration informal surveying has already shown increased coho salmon spawning activity, demonstrated by several coho salmon nests (known as redds) and coho salmon carcasses upstream from the restoration site. “The transformation is blowing my mind,” CDFW environmental scientist Scott Monday said of the exceptional early results. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

The man-made barrier that was the focus of the project was significantly restricting spawning coho salmon, cutting them off from miles of prime habitat further upstream. Begun in 2014, the complicated project involved several phases of barrier removal, gradually replacing it with a series of weirs which slow and pool the flowing water while incrementally increasing in elevation. “This was a challenging project, with amazing contributions from CDFW and our contractors,” said Doug Kern, Mendocino Land Trust director of conservation. “You couldn’t have a more inspiring or rewarding result than seeing fish spawning above the barrier so soon after project completion.”

The site has been visited by several people trained in salmon spawner surveying who have all made similar observations. Nicolet Houtz, conservation project manager for Mendocino Land Trust, documented several coho salmon carcasses and several redds. “I was really excited to see the fish carcasses. It may seem counter-intuitive to be excited about dead fish, but it means the restoration project was successful and the fish were able to navigate upstream to spawn. Part of the coho salmon life cycle is that they produce offspring when spawning, then die after reproduction,” Houtz said.

Mendocino Land Trust has been a leader in land conservation, stewardship and habitat restoration in Mendocino County for more than 40 years. Well known for its extensive network of coastal beaches and public access trails, Mendocino Land Trust also engages in conservation projects countywide. Since 1976, Mendocino Land Trust has worked with willing landowners to protect more than 14,000 acres of forests, wildlife habitat and agricultural lands in Mendocino County. For more information, visit its website at MendocinoLandTrust.org.

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Nicolet Houtz- Conservation Project Manager, Mendocino Land Trust nhoutz@mendocinolandtrust.org
Scott Monday- Environmental Scientist, CDFW scott.monday@wildlife.ca.gov