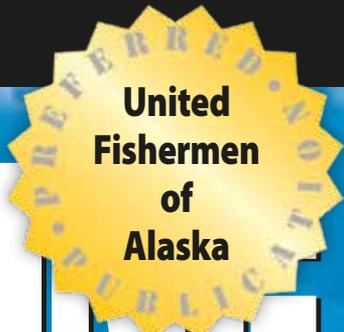


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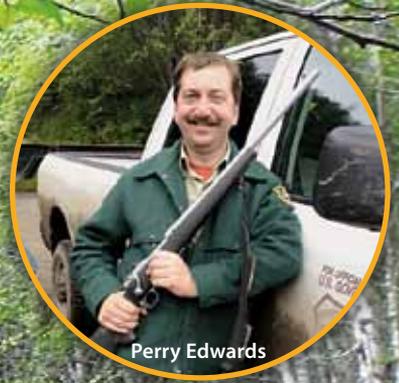


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Perry Edwards

# Sitkoh River: Good fishing begins with a bulldozer

Bulldozers tore up an Alaska salmon stream last summer — on purpose.

Workers operating heavy equipment for Aqua Terra Restoration LLC moved a 1,800-foot-long stretch of the Sitkoh River back to its original channel and out of an old logging road it had overtaken.

“This logging road is not prime salmon habitat. It’s wide, it’s very shallow, there are no pools, there are no spawning gravels, and also there’s no good rooting mass to hold the banks in place,” said Edwards, ecosystems staff officer for the U.S. Forest Service, pointing toward the river.

Edwards spoke to a group of reporters and fishermen visiting the Sitkoh River restoration project on Chichagof Island, in Southeast Alaska’s 17 million-acre Tongass National Forest. It was a joint effort by the Forest Service, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Trout Unlimited, and Sitka Conservation Society to fix what some describe as a Tongass “hammered gem” — a wounded but high-value salmon-producing watershed in one of Alaska’s most prolific fish nurseries.

**Bad shape:** As Edwards explained, the river was in bad shape

until last summer. Back in the 1970s, before the passage of modern-day forestry laws, loggers clear-cut old-growth trees along the riverbanks, exposing the waterway to erosion and sedimentation, and leading it to jump course and flow down a timber-harvest access road.

Once an important producer of pink and coho salmon, steelhead, Dolly Varden, and cutthroat trout, the Sitkoh lost much of its spawning and rearing capacity because of logging-related problems. The river remained that way for many years. But with a recent policy shift announced by the Forest Service in how it manages the Tongass, the Sitkoh received some much-needed first aid.

“Sitkoh is part of a larger plan that the Forest Service has for Southeast Alaska,” said Wayne Owen, Forest Service’s regional director of Wildlife, Fisheries, Ecology, Watershed, and Subsistence.

Owen — who also briefed reporters along with Edwards — was referring to the “Tongass transition,” a major policy move that the Forest Service announced in May 2010. The transition’s centerpiece is the federal agency’s commitment to moving away from

◀ *Crippled by the effects of logging, the Sitkoh River needed remedial work to once again hold a bounty of salmon. Forest Service photos by Teresa Haugh/U.S. Forest Service*

old-growth logging in the Tongass and shifting toward second-growth management, forest restoration, and job creation in tourism, fisheries, mariculture, and renewable energy.

Since the announcement, the agency has conducted or is planning to carry out several large-scale Tongass restoration projects that benefit fish. In summer 2011, the Forest Service completed a major salmon habitat restoration project on the Harris River on Prince of Wales Island, in collaboration with The Nature Conservancy and other groups. Last summer, in addition to Sitkoh, the Forest Service conducted river restoration on 12 Mile Creek on Prince of Wales and was preparing for 2013 projects at Saginaw River and Kennel Creek near the villages of Kake and Hoonah in Southeast. Both villages have been heavily impacted by logging.

**The economy:** By emphasizing restoration, the Forest Service is acknowledging the importance of salmon to the regional economy of Southeast. That's a big step for an agency that long viewed old-growth timber as the Tongass' top commodity.

In a fact sheet released earlier this year, the Forest Service noted that salmon fishing and fish processing supports one in 10 jobs in Southeast Alaska; on average, 48 million wild salmon are caught in the Tongass annually; and the economic contribution from salmon is nearly \$1 billion a year.

As it focuses on restoration, the Forest Service also is attempting to move the existing timber industry toward young-growth trees rather than the rare, old-growth spruce, hemlock, and cedar that were harvested industrially for more than four decades, Owen explained.

**Sustainable:** "We're trying to move our industry into a more sustainable, long-term footing," said Owen. "We think it's in the best interest of everyone, not just the people of Southeast Alaska but for all people throughout the United States who benefit from what is here in Alaska."

A 2011 Forest Service assessment of Tongass watersheds identified about 70 that require work to restore fish habitat — and Sitkoh was near the top of the list. Because of its past productivity, its proximity to commercial fishing grounds near Sitka, and its historic use by subsistence fishermen, the Forest Service decided to make the Sitkoh River a key candidate for restoration.

To do so, the agency sought partners and found them with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Trout Unlimited, and Sitka Conservation Society. The organizations gathered \$318,000 and designed a restoration project that took place during June and July.

Besides re-routing the river out of the logging road, the work also involved placing large logs back in the river to create pools for salmon spawning and rearing, removing blocked culverts,

and thinning hundreds of acres of thick second-growth forest to improve conditions for wildlife, particularly Sitka black-tailed deer, a popular target for sport and subsistence hunters.

The restoration effort is expected to boost the Sitkoh's fish productivity significantly, according to the Forest Service. As he directed operations at Sitkoh last summer, project manager Martin Becker, a Forest Service hydrologist, explained the mechanics of re-engineering fish habitat.

**Overwinter:** "When you have coho and steelhead and fish like that, that spend multiple years in freshwater, they need those pools to overwinter in when the flows dry up and temperatures drop and things freeze. The water is going to severely drop in these channels, and it's just those deep pools that are going to hold the water that the fish need," said Becker.

Joining federal and state officials and reporters on the Sitkoh tour was Mark Vinsel, the outgoing executive director of United Fishermen of Alaska, which represents 37 fishing organizations across Alaska and its offshore waters.

Vinsel said he was glad to see the Forest Service and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game work together in this case to support salmon habitat. The top priority for the Tongass should be maintaining the forest habitat, which supports about one-third of



*This shot shows some of the work being done to the Sitkoh River by Aqua Terra Restoration LLC.*

Alaska's overall salmon harvest, and restoring watersheds where damage has occurred, he said. That's something everyone should be able to agree on, he said.

"Stream restoration improves conditions for all the species of fish in a given system. Better habitat will eventually mean more fish, and that benefits commercial fishermen across gear groups, as well as anglers and subsistence users as well," Vinsel said.

According to Bruce Wallace, vice president of UFA, forest restoration makes dollars and sense.

"Projects that improve fish habitat like the one at Sitkoh are a win-win for fish and the people who depend upon them for jobs and livelihoods," said Wallace, a Juneau seiner. ↓

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