Log Jam in Salmon Stream Culvert Proves Immovable

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Dave Kaplan ties off a rope to stumps and logs stuck inside a culvert that connects Mill Bay with Island Lake. There is concern that pink and silver salmon might be blocked from reaching their spawning grounds if the log jam worsens. Brianna Gibbs/KMXT photo

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While the sun was shining brightly Thursday, a group of Kodiak Soil and Water Conservation District employees spent their morning shadowed by a large culvert on the north end of Mill Bay Beach.

Their voices echoed in the depths of the culvert, where the crew faced the monstrous task of removing five giant tree stumps piled high and wedged across the small stream. Their motivation was far from aesthetic appeal, but rather a noble attempt to clear a path for pink and silver salmon, expected to arrive at their spawning stream any day.

Dave Kaplan is the project coordinator for the conservation group. He says the stream is the way home to thousands of hatchery fish from Kodiak Regional Aquaculture Association.

"Basically KRAA still stocks the lake up here, on the system. About 40-60,000 fry, Coho. They've been doing it since I was at the hatchery, that was '98. And there's a nice little shot of pinks that come through here. It's a minor run, it's not a major run. And then later on the coho will come. And the coho get from right here all the way up the falls into the lake. Pretty hardy fish. And there's a couple sets of barrier falls up stream, and the coho get up. So now we're just trying, if we can get them passage in here, they should be OK."

Joe Dinnocenzo is the district manager for soil and water. He said a blockage of this size significantly affects the salmon that are produced in that stream.

-- (Salmon Stream 2 : 25 "It won't produce anything when it's blocked. Kodiak soil and water like to try and find opportunities like this where we can increase salmon production. How'd you hear about this? I used to work for Fish and Game and so I hear public comments all the time. And people have asked to do something about this several times, and it just hadn't gotten done.")

Dinnocenzo said the block has been building for a number of years, and he and his crew finally decided to do something about it. The only problem, according to Kaplan, is the fact that it is a salmon stream, which significantly reduces resources they can use to remove the logs.

-- (Salmon Stream 3 : 15 "You know, this is an anadromous stream, we got permission to come in with hand tools. We're not qualified to come in with big stuff. We're biologists. Laughs. You can see what it's going to take.")

In the end, the logs prevailed over the hand tools, and short of firing up a chainsaw in the dark, slippery culvert, the blockage refused budge. But Kaplan said the day wasn't a complete waste. Before they could even enter the culvert, an additional four trunks were removed from the entrance.

-- (Salmon Stream 4 : 15 "You know Joe, as long as they have passage for now, as long as they got passage for now, we cleared this out. You know and then a decision needs to be made, who's going to come in and clean this up.")

Kaplan said using mechanical tools near a salmon stream requires specific permits, permits that take time to obtain. He said until something is done, fish won't be able to make it up the stream, wasting the resources KRAA invested in.

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