

HOOD CANAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL

Summer 2004

Thoughts on Major Problems Threatening Hood Canal

offered by Bill Matchett, President, BOD of the Hood Canal Environmental Council

The lowest tide in nineteen years, on June 5th, provided the opportunity for a walk south along the beach from Nellita to the Harding Creek estuary, slides and fallen trees having blocked that possibility during lesser low tides. That walk, in the 1960s and 70s, always showed the fecundity of the Canal, scuttling crabs in the eel grass, multiple moon snails, hundreds of star fish and, our special delight, sand dollars, dead and alive. We collected the empty white shells, when they were unbroken, and admired the living ones in their brown fur-like covering, standing on edge, half-buried in the sandy mud in close ranks, as though a stack of them had fallen over. We called the tiny ones sand pennies and calculated the fortune their amplitude represented. Not this time. We saw a few crabs, perhaps two dozen star fish, one shell from a dead moon snail and not a single sand dollar, dead or alive.

Anecdotal evidence is of course not science, but there seems to us, as long-time residents, little question that the Canal is in major trouble, even far north of the known dissolved oxygen problem. Waterbirds too are less common than they were. Of course the gulls and loons head for their breeding areas in June, but we no longer see the winter rafts of ducks we knew thirty years ago. A few mergansers, goldeneyes and loons, occasional buffleheads, guillemots and grebes, but it has been many years since we last saw a scoter here. They once came in winter flocks of hundreds. To what extent the problem lies here, and to what extent elsewhere on their migration route is not clear. There is so much we do not know!

Individuals respond to the lack of final answers in quite opposite ways. There are those who assume that uncertain knowledge means there are no constraints, there is no reason to refrain from any action they wish to take to further their personal goals. Others assume that caution is the only rational response; when we don't know what we are doing, further damage should be avoided at all cost.

Obviously HCEC is in the latter camp; obviously Fred Hill Materials and apparently, alas, the Jefferson County Commissioners are in the former. Both are going to extraordinary lengths to oppose the public will. As we predicted, Fred Hill Materials, through its President, Alex Hill, is now trying to use "free gravel" as a claim to being environmentalists, as though this would excuse the damage they intend. The 350 people who crowded in to the June 9th hearing think otherwise, though Jefferson County tried to silence them with the preposterous claim that "Commissioners are prohibited by state law from hearing any comments, questions or statements about the adequacy, contents or substance of the environmental review that was done." Which is to say that they were holding a

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hearing at which the public was not to be permitted to address the issue.

This ludicrous position, no doubt sold to the County by the Fred Hill team, was tellingly refuted by our lawyers ("our" here meaning the Hood Canal Coalition, HCEC, the Jefferson County Green Party, Kitsap Audubon Society, Olympic Environmental Council, People for a Liveable Community and People for Puget Sound, all cooperating in resisting Fred Hill) and the hearing preceded despite this attempt at a gag order. It shows the degree, however, to which Jefferson County appears to be in Fred Hill's pocket. Fortunately, we have Representative Norm Dicks on our side, equally determined that this misguided project be halted. Even he, as pro-Labor as a Representative can be, recognizes that it is not worth endangering the total economy of the Canal for the handful of jobs the project might create.

On the other major problem facing the Canal, the disastrously low levels of dissolved oxygen, there is at least general recognition of the fact that there IS a problem, with no opposition to be battled. Local, State and Federal agencies have all come together and money is being made available to clarify the causes. If the problem can be solved, it will be. This is a truly cooperative effort and the board of HCEC wants to thank and commend all those who are involved. We do not mean to omit anyone if we particularly single out Jan Newton of the State Department of Natural Resources and the University of Washington School of Oceanography, who raised everyone's consciousness of the problem, Bob Hager of the Lower Hood Canal Watershed Committee, the Puget Sound Action Team, the Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group and, once again, Representative Norm Dicks. We salute them all. *WHM*

UPDATE: Anderson Landing: Under the leadership of chairperson Bob McBride and other Anderson Landing Stewards, three walking loops are now established and there is parking area just off Anderson Hill Road on Warren Road. Thanks to Matt Pitchford's Boy Scout Eagle Project a fence is around the parking area, trail markers are in place and an informational kiosk has been installed. A bench with a dedicatory appreciation plaque acknowledging all of the contributions to Hood Canal of Joe and Irene Lambert is due to be placed at the northern most point of the park. The next work party is Saturday, July 17, 9am. Questions; call Bob McBride,(360) 692-0078.

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