

Stimulus funds bring Caspian tern project to Siskiyou County

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A federal stimulus package-funded project is underway in northeastern Siskiyou County, one piece of a larger project aimed at balancing the needs of the world's largest Caspian tern colony with those of a struggling salmon population in the Columbia River, which is shared by the states of Oregon and Washington.

The portion of the project taking place in Siskiyou County involves the construction of two rock islands, one in a section of the Tule Lake National Wildlife Refuge and another in the Orems unit of Lower Klamath Lake, according to Amy Echols of the Public Affairs office of the Portland District United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). The project also includes the construction and placement of a floating island on Sheepy Lake, which is located near Dorris along route 161.

The entire project goes back to the late 1990s, when the USACE reported that an estimated colony of 10,000 nesting pairs of Caspian terns on Rice Island in the Columbia River were consuming approximately 6 million to 25 million salmonid smolts per year, according to a 1999 USACE report. The report stated that the plan originally involved encouraging the tern population to spread out to East Sand Island, which is located closer to the river's estuary. Cormorants on East Sand Island had showed a marked decrease in salmonid consumption compared to their counterparts on Rice Island, and researchers believed that the increase in food source diversity would mean fewer salmonids consumed if the tern population was shifted toward the estuary.

The project involved making areas of Rice Island less attractive for nesting while creating nesting areas on East Sand Island, according to the report. This was accomplished by creating sandy, vegetation-free areas preferred by terns on East Sand Island and vegetating areas on Rice Island. Fencing was also erected on Rice Island to further deter nesting there.

Ultimately, according to Echols, the plan would lead to the creation of other tern-friendly habitat across the birds' natural migration routes in the western United States in an effort to draw down the total tern population feeding on salmonids in the Columbia River, shifting the population away from both the East Sand and Rice islands.

Echols said that initially the Klamath was not included in the project's scope, which includes three sites in Oregon and two in the San Francisco bay area.

Paul Schmidt, project manager for the Siskiyou County project and Environmental Resource Specialist with the USACE, said that a number of factors led to the inclusion of lakes in Siskiyou County.

Schmidt said that after the completion of the Environmental Impact Statement process in 2004, a regional evaluation had revealed that historically, the Klamath area and parts of Oregon and Nevada had supported Caspian tern populations. He added that the Siskiyou locations were chosen for sufficient water and fishery resources, as well as management practices for the lakes, specifically with regard to control of lake levels.

Echols said that the plan for East Sand Island will mirror that for Rice Island, which, after successful seeding and fencing, was reduced to one acre of suitable tern habitat, thus reducing the number of breeding pairs utilizing the island. Schmidt said that for every two acres of nesting area created elsewhere, one acre will be reduced on East Sand Island.

Asked how the islands are built, Echols said that during water drawdown periods, construction crews build a road to the point where the rock island will be set up.

Once the road is set up, Echols said, rocks of decreasing size are brought in and layered large to small to create an island, eventually covered with the final layer, made up of rock resembling "pea" gravel, which is coarser than sand but smaller than rocks.

The floating island, on the other hand, is made up of a set of interlocking pieces made from recycled plastic bottles. The pieces are assembled onshore, covered with the sand-like rock and then sent out on to the water, where the island will be tethered to a set spot on the lake, Echols said.

In order to attract the terns to the islands, tern decoys are placed about the surface and mating calls are played using speakers set up at various places on the island, according to Echols. She said that a study blind is set up on or near the island in order to allow researchers to monitor the number of nesting pairs, hatchlings and other related data.

For the construction of the rock islands, the USACE has contracted with Washington-based LKE Corporation and the floating island will be constructed by Floating Islands West, according to Echols.

Asked why no local contractors were used, Schmidt said that with the rock islands, there were no contractors in the area who met the requirements of the government contract guidelines, namely, a qualified contractor meeting the Small Business Act (SBA) section 8A guidelines. Section 8A of the SBA requires certain contracts to target businesses at least 51 percent owned by "a socially and economically disadvantaged citizen of the U.S. or an economically disadvantaged Indian tribe."

Echols said that the floating island will be constructed by Floating Islands West because of that company's specialty in that area.

Echols said that the stimulus funds will still be directly applied to the area in other ways. She said that LKE hired four local equipment operators and a fifth employee with specialized road grading skills. She added that the stone being used for the two rock islands is being hauled by various Klamath Falls companies.

Echols also stated that through LKE the stimulus funds are injecting capital into Tulelake, through rental of motel and trailer park space, the purchase of diesel fuel, everyday purchases and also by attending a local charity barbecue.

Another question asked of Schmidt and Echols in a Monday interview was whether or not there is any concern that increasing predation by increasing tern numbers would create a problem in the Tulelake ecosystem.

Schmidt said that there is no concern because the locations have a "significant fishery resource." He added, "We are not creating a new market for concerns."

In response to a question of whether or not other birds might present an obstacle to terns utilizing the islands, Schmidt said that the islands are set up to attract terns, so it is believed that they will be able to establish nesting on the islands before other species. Both Echols and Schmidt said that other birds may use the islands periodically, but the intended result, tern nesting, has been accomplished on the other projects completed thus far in Oregon. Schmidt was also asked at what point it would be possible to determine whether or not the whole project will have had an appreciable effect on the salmon numbers in the Columbia River. He estimated that it will be four to five years before the whole scenario will play out, with two to three years to establish the new islands and just as long for the tern population to shift and adapt, spreading across the west.

All three projects, which are a joint venture between the San Francisco District of the USACE and the Fish and Wildlife Service, are funded by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act contract. Echols reported that the Tulelake reserve rock island's cost is approximately \$1.1 million, the Orems unit rock island's cost is approximately \$650,000 and the Sheepy Lake floating island's cost is approximately \$2.3 million. Construction of both rock islands is underway, with the floating island construction expected to begin in October.