

ODFW Comments to Columbia County re: Existing Wetland Habitat Functions and Values at Proposed NEXT Renewables Fuels LLC Project Site

12/21/2021

ODFW staff conducted site visits on 11/18/21 and 12/9/21 to assess existing wetland habitat functions and values for fish and wildlife, as requested by Columbia County. We also reviewed available fish and wildlife observation data and habitat layers to inform our evaluation of existing conditions and importance to fish and wildlife. Our assessment is as follows:

1. Existing wetlands are characterized by a diversity of wetland types and vegetative conditions, interspersed with many habitat edges created by patches of vegetation and channelized waterways. Existing vegetation is dominated by nonnative species (e.g., reed canary grass, teasel, Himalayan blackberry, hybrid poplar). Much of the existing wetland habitat is subject to cattle grazing.
2. While the existing wetlands have been altered by past land management practices (e.g., levee construction, stream channel simplification) and are degraded by current practices and infestations of non-native plants, existing wetland conditions support key life functions (e.g., foraging, hiding, resting, breeding/nesting, movement/dispersal) for a variety of wildlife species.
3. The proposed project is within an Oregon Conservation Strategy Conservation Opportunity Area (COA), COA ID #006, Columbia River-Blind Slough Swamp¹. The value of the existing wetlands for fish and wildlife is enhanced by its location along the Lower Columbia River mainstem, proximity to Crims Island, and presence of adjacent wetland and upland habitat types.
4. Existing wetlands provide useable habitat Coastal cutthroat trout and a variety of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, including those identified as Species of Greatest Conservation Need² (e.g., Dusky Canada goose, Streaked horned lark, Willow flycatcher, Silver-haired bat, Western painted turtle, Northern red-legged frog). Many of these species have been documented on/near the project site.
5. The existing wetland habitats (and greater project site/area) have local and regional importance for Columbian white-tailed deer (CTWD, Federally Threatened), as well as for migratory and wintering waterfowl and shorebirds. The project site and existing wetlands lie within mapped CWTD habitat (ODFW 2017³), which provides useable habitat for foraging, hiding, movement/dispersal, and fawning.

¹ <https://oregonconservationstrategy.org/conservation-opportunity-area/columbia-river-blind-slough-swamp/>

² <https://oregonconservationstrategy.org/ocs-strategy-species/>

³ <https://www.dfw.state.or.us/lands/docs/ODFW%20Guidelines%20BGWR%20Western%20Oregon.pdf>