**Project Number: 15-1048**

**Project Name: Camano Is State Park Tidal Marsh Feasibility**

**Sponsor: Skagit River System Cooperative**

**Response to Review Comments**

***Comments from SRFB Reviewers:***

1. *Additional clarity should be added to the proposal in terms of the relationship of this effort with other efforts (such as wetland mitigation) in the Park that are planned in the near future. Access to structures such as the boathouse should be defined and described as one of the design criteria for the preliminary designs to ensure long term access to this park feature. Also, including further details of the crossing through which freshwater would connect with the marsh area once it is opened.*

We agree, and have updated our proposal accordingly.

1. *Is there a way to reconstruct the boat ramp to allow for sediment transport underneath it to reduce both the cost of maintenance and the risk of channel blocking?*

This is one of the design elements that will be considered during the design process. However, a reconstruction such as this would greatly increase project cost, so if a sustainable channel can be constructed with the boat launch in its current configuration, this would be our preference. Our proposal has been updated to reflect this.

**Additional Comments:**

1. *The proposal needs to be updated to the 2015 outline.*

A proposal using the 2015 outline was uploaded prior to the site visits, but may have not been available in time for download by the review time. We had originally been informed that our proposal from the previous grant round would suffice because the content had not changed. Our apologies for any inconvenience.

**Comments from Salmon TAG and WRAC Members**

1. *“Camano Island State Park: State is currently removing three front end loader buckets of coarse drift per day from the updrift side of the boat ramp and dumping it on the downdrift side. Hard to believe there's enough flow to keep a channel open against this onslaught, especially as the state does not want to do any maintenance. This looks like a Perego/Crockett/Swantown - a naturally closed off pocket estuary. Gain is too questionable to risk any loss of recreational opportunity which helps people feel connected to the sound and its life.*

We believe there are excellent opportunities for meaningful habitat restoration, , but also recognize that land use constraints might preclude meaningful restoration of natural processes. Resolving this apparent conundrum in a logical and empirical manner is exactly what we are proposing to do with this project. If our analysis concludes that natural processes cannot be sustainably restored given the current land use constraints, then we have no intention to proceed to design and subsequent construction.. We fully recognize that the public nature of the site underlines the importance of the project working as intended. Second, during the State Park's CAMP process (2013), a great number of public comments were received that were supportive of a project for the very reason you note here- that a restoration project and the educational opportunities it presents will help people feel connected to the Sound and its life. As voiced in a number CAMP comments, many users of the park consider wildlife viewing and learning about the natural world a recreational opportunity of equal worth to activities such as picnicking or throwing a frisbee. This also fits well with the mission of the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission, which

*"...cares for Washington's most treasured lands, waters, and historic places. State parks connect all Washingtonians to their diverse natural and cultural heritage and provide memorable recreational and educational experiences that enhance their lives.”*

That said, we believe there is reason to believe the constraints can be reconciled such that we can maintain continued access at the site for picnicking, dog walking, etc, with opportunities to improve conditions at the site for such uses. Much of the area that would be inundated is already seasonally flooded, and is only accessible for a portion of the year, hence our desire to advance this proposal.

1. *Once again, I believe this project is inappropriately titled. Perhaps it once had a surface water connection to Saratoga Passage, perhaps not. But the put the word Reconnection in the title implies that we know or strongly suspect it was once connected and available for use by juvenile salmonids. That is misleading and the project should be given a new title.*

It is apparent that we disagree on the subject of historic condition. Based upon interpretation of topographic evidence by geomorphologists (Shipman *in* State Parks 2013, McBride 2009) and archaeologists (Meatte 2011, Schalk et al. 2010), as well as based upon sediment sampling (Washington State Parks 2014), we do strongly suspect that the site was once connected at a minimum on a seasonal basis. Based upon comparison of existing site elevations to other high elevation pocket estuary sites we do strongly suspect that that the site was once available to juvenile salmonids.

However, in the spirit of compromise and our desire to be explicit regarding our intentions we have no issues with changing the title of the project proposal. We propose changing the title to “Camano Island State Park Tidal Marsh Feasibility”. We feel this might convey to the lay reader the very essence of our proposal, which is a study design alternatives that would lead to establishing tidal marsh habitat. Please let us know if this meets the spirit of your request.

1. *Consistent with that concern, the project summary is also inappropriate in my opinion. A change in project scope is needed. This project should start as a feasibility study with the goal to determine whether or not the lagoon was ever connected to Saratoga Passage as the first question to be answered before considering designs. This was the approach at Swantown and I believe is appropriate here. I say this because I think we should carefully consider whether or not we want to support, or give high priority to, projects which create habitat as opposed to those which restore habitat. Habitat creation projects are usually working against physical forces and require a lot of maintenance to keep them functioning effectively if at all. Absent big changes in the surrounding physical environment, appropriately designed restoration projects should need minimal maintenance. If we don't know which this is (creation or restoration), how can we honestly evaluate it?*

Similar in spirit to our response above, we propose changing the wording of the proposal such that references to a historic “pocket estuary” are omitted in favor of more specific terms that highlight our emphasis on natural processes such as “tidal marsh, “unique shoreline landform” and "tidal hydrology". These changes are reflected in the revised summary below and have been carried through the proposal as tracked changes.

“This project intends to evaluate potential actions and design alternatives for restoring natural hydrological processes to the unique shoreline land form located at Camano Island State Park. The proximate goal of this project is to determine the feasibility of restoring natural processes to the site given modern land use constraints. If an action is deemed feasible a preliminary design will be developed in a manner consistent with natural habitat processes and the recreational and educational uses of the park envisioned by Washington State Parks staff and citizen user groups (Washington State Parks, 2013).”

1. *"It is important to proceed with this project very carefully as it will unavoidably get tremendous public exposure. A failed project would be a big, big deal.”*

We agree completely. We have consistently stated that we have no interest in constructing a project that A) does not benefit salmon, B) impacts recreation/valued park uses in a negative way, and/or C) requires ongoing maintenance. We are very cognizant of the fact that the high public exposure represents either a tremendous opportunity for outreach and education or a black eye for salmon recovery, and do not intend to proceed unless a successful project appears likely.

1. *“Relative to the Camano State Park proposal: my recollection is that two holes or so had been dug for another effort and it was found that there was evidence that the lagoon was connected at some time. What removed the connection is unknown and the challenge is to not only restore it but to create something that will endure - not easy.”*

We agree that the construction of a project that is sustainable and fits within the recreation and operational requirements of the park will be challenging, but the evidence presented thus far (geomorphic and the sedimentary evidence that you mention), coupled with modeling results lead us to feel that a more refined investigation/engineering analysis is warranted.

1. *“I would like to know more about the two holes that were poked for archaeological studies. My first concern is that archaeologists are looking into holes for different reasons than to evaluate whether someplace was a salt marsh or not, so their methodology might not be appropriate to the question of whether the wetland had a surface connection to Saratoga Passage. So, was the material evaluated as to the nature of the peat regarding its origin and the time of its formation? That is, did they evaluate its age (often possible with volcanic material layers found in peat if old enough), its species composition, and was there evidence of peat right at the beach berm implying a surface water connection? Paleoecologists are the folks to ask these questions of. If there is not some information about age and location of a channel, then all we have is that there was a salt marsh there, which frankly, you could reasonably surmise without digging a pit. It does not necessarily follow that the salt marsh was connected to Saratoga Passage before human alterations began. Many salt marshes adjacent to the Salish Sea were not connected in the recent past, having closed off through natural processes long ago. For instance, there is a salt marsh at Swantown Lake on the west side of Whidbey, and an evident salt marsh at Crockett Lake, yet I do not think many people would argue that they were connected via a surface water channel in the recent past."*

The archaeological study did not look at the age of the sediments. Geomorphologists Shipman (State Parks 2013) and McBride (2009) believe, based on site topography, that the historic channel opening would have been located near the current boat launch.

*Shipman's comments in State Parks 2013:*

***Lowell Point*** *The low area of Lowell Point began as a large wetland and/or lagoon behind a long curving spit. Because it is low-lying, portions are subject to flooding during unusually high tides. This area was very likely a tidal marsh and lagoon prior to development. There appears to have been a tidal inlet at the north end. The details aren’t completely clear, but this is consistent with observations of the current landscape and with similar features around the Sound. This area has been identified by the Skagit River System Cooperative for a potential area for habitat restoration project to help in the recovery of wild Skagit Chinook salmon populations. The boat ramp is located at the more sheltered northern end. Because sediment transport on the beach is from south to north, sediment accumulates on the ramp and has to be removed by parks staff. This may become a bigger problem with time. In the future, there might be ways to modify the ramp in order to minimize the amount of maintenance*

In this location, the ground has been disturbed and fill has been placed for the construction of the parking area and boat launch, so it is unknown whether more precise information about the location and age of a channel could be gleaned via further test pits. However, if the reviewers desire it to be incorporated, additional test pits could be dug as part of the more detailed inlet investigation proposed here.

Whether or not Swantown Lake or Crockett Lake, both on the West side of Whidbey Island, ever had a connection has no bearing on whether the Camano Island State Park site had a connection. Those first two sites are exposed to a much greater degree of wave energy, have potentially different sediment regimes, and may have even been subject to different seismic processes, so linking them to the CISP site is misleading at best.

Regarding human alterations of the site, do only very recent human activities associated with use of the site within the past few centuries count? What is the cut-off point for human alteration? It is well documented that native groups used sites such as this long before the area was colonized by European settlers, and there is very strong archaeological evidence that a similar lagoon at Cama Beach, just up the shoreline to the north, was filled in as a direct result of native uses of the site (Meatte 2011, Schalk et al. 2010). It is thought that the Lowell Point lagoon was formed via similar processes to that at Cama Beach, and given the ample evidence of historic cultural uses at Lowell Point (State Parks 2014), it is possible that similar uses had similar effects.

1. *After that, then it would be appropriate to make a decision on design, informed by a conclusion of whether or not the salt marsh was connected or not.*

See above.

1. *"I am not arguing against the project, I am just disturbed by what I see as creeping assumptions."*

A review of all of the past applications for this project, all of which are available on PRISM, will show that our approach and assumptions have remained consistent. The only thing that has changed has been the incorporation of a more robust public process.

1. *"Given the very public visibility of this proposed project, failure would be a really bad thing.”*

Yes. We have been consistent, wholehearted agreement on this point.