

Elk Creek plan afoot

Corps undertakes yearlong effort to manage 2,600 acres of land originally tapped for Elk Creek Lake

By [Mark Freeman](#)

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TRAIL — A chorus of croaking frogs accompanies Jim Buck as he strolls through an artificial forest of logs, downed trees and willow chutes that dot the new-look banks of Elk Creek where a lake once was envisioned.

The new channel would have been underneath more than 100 feet of water by now, had the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed Elk Creek Dam when it was authorized by Congress in 1962.

But now the creek snakes through gravel and artificially crafted salmon habitat before zipping through a famous notch cut into the dam 18 months ago as a way for the Corps to end decades of debate over the mothballed dam.

"Forever and a day, the whole focus was on the dam — whether to build it, whether to not build it and whether to notch it," says Buck, the Corps' Rogue Basin operations manager.

"Now, it's time to focus on the land," Buck says.

The Corps is embarking on a year-long effort to create a management plan for 2,600 acres of land originally tapped for Elk Creek Lake, which has been in limbo since lawsuits halted the half-built dam's construction in 1988.

Once completed, the plan will guide how the Corps will mesh low-intensity recreation with the land's role as habitat for deer, elk, salmon and steelhead.

"You don't always need well-developed places," Buck says. "This is a nice, quiet place where you can enjoy yourself while not next to a road."

The plan also will address what, if anything, to do with the mountains of gravel and sand stacked upstream of the notched dam, and how to knock back starthistle and other noxious weeds expected to sprout on both sides of what remains of the dam, Buck says.

The effort likely will include some inventories to look at the various flora and fauna that call the area home, including western pond turtles, threatened coho salmon, wood ducks and other critters wandering in and out of the low-land Elk Creek drainage about a mile upstream of its confluence with the Rogue River.

"There are probably some things we don't even know will come up, since everything's been so dam-centric instead of land-centric," Buck says.

The land is open to public use, with access through separate gates above and below the defunct dam. Vehicles are banned Nov. 15 through April 30 as part of a seasonal road closure designed to improve winter range for black-tailed deer.

In season, the area is visited by hikers and berry pickers, hunters, mountain bicyclists and others, Buck says.

"I don't expect that to change much," Buck says.

What has changed, however, is the moonscape that was intended to be the reservoir's bottom.

Last year, contractors rebuilt the creek channel through the reservoir zone and created a large off-channel area complete with strategically placed trees and logs buried upright in the gravel to look like a woody Stonehenge.

Two small, seasonal tributaries immediately downstream and upstream of the dam also received major face-lifts, all meant to create spawning and rearing habitat for wild coho salmon and steelhead that spawn in the Elk Creek basin.

The basin accounts for about 10 percent of available Rogue Basin spawning habitat upstream of Gold Ray Dam.

About 45,000 various willows, pines and other native plants were added to stabilize soils and eventually create a streamside riparian zone that will provide cover for salmon and protect the creek's waters from Southern Oregon's blistering summer sun.

The work cost about \$2 million, Buck says. The plants are taking advantage of a light winter in the flashy Elk Creek basin, which is known occasionally for intense winter flows during storm events.

This winter's storms never materialized in the Elk Creek basin, sparing the plants from getting washed away as they work to take root in the gravelly soil.

"Having these relatively low flows has allowed everything to settle in," Buck says. "It's just been excellent."

History of Elk Creek Dam

Elk Creek Dam was authorized as part of the Rogue River basin's trio of dams meant to control winter floods and release stored water in the summer to enhance fish habitat. Lost Creek and Applegate are the other two. Here's a brief history:

1986: Construction begins.

1987: Court injunction over fishery and water-quality concerns halts construction.

1988: Work on the dam ends Jan. 5.

1989: The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers proposes finishing the dam but with a hole in its base so Elk Creek could flow through it and fish could swim past it under most conditions. The dam still could be used to curb flooding during high-water events.

1992: The Corps begins trapping and hauling fish around the dam.

1996: After continued resistance from environmental groups, the Corps decides not to pursue the environmental studies needed to get a court injunction lifted.

2006: The Corps plans to notch the dam before a permit to trap and haul threatened coho expires that year.

2007: The Corps has spent \$113.9 million on the project as of Sept. 30. If the dam had been finished as planned in the late 1980s, the total bill would have come to \$121 million.

2008: Blasting crews detonate their first load of dynamite under a \$7.9-million contract to notch the dam on July 15. The final blast is detonated Aug. 17.

2009: A \$2 million restoration effort rebuilds the stream channel and adds 45,000 plants for bank stabilization and a future streamside riparian zone.

2010: The Corps embarks on a plan for managing its 2,600 acres of what was to have been the reservoir and banks.