

December 10, 2003

Rob Iwamoto
Acting Forest Supervisor
USDA Forest Service
Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest
Supervisor's Office
21905 64th Avenue West
Mountlake Terrace, WA 98043

RE: Forest infrastructure damage from recent flood event

Dear Mr. Iwamoto:

Recent flood damage to roads and bridges in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest has had a significant impact on opportunities for river-based recreation on the Sauk and Suiattle Rivers. Despite the devastating damage that resulted, we view this as an opportunity to improve public access to these important rivers while affording greater protection to riparian resources.

American Whitewater (AW) is a national organization with more than 8,000 individual members and 150 affiliate clubs, representing approximately 180,000 river recreationists. Our mission is to *conserve and restore America's whitewater resources, and to enhance opportunities to enjoy them safely*. Given the fact that river conservation is important to our membership we request that when considering repairs to roads and bridges, the Forest Service work towards solutions that preserve natural river processes.

We believe significant opportunities exist for improvements that will benefit fish and wildlife while reducing the overall risk to Forest Service infrastructure from future floods. Past experience on Forest Service and private timber lands has demonstrated that reevaluating the location of roads and bridges prone to flood damage, often proves to be more cost-effective overall than the conventional approach of simply replacing damaged structures as they were before the flood. The dual goal of providing infrastructure that provides important public access that is less susceptible to future flood damage while protecting important habitat can thus be achieved.

We wish to comment on a couple of key sites within the Darrington Ranger District.

Forest Road 26 Boundary Bridge

The Boundary Bridge, located on FR 26 and at Suiattle River mile 11.7 was severely damaged resulting in lost river access. This bridge has served as an important access point for recreational river users but the trail along the southern approach to the bridge was a steep and muddy bank that was severely eroded. This access was particularly cumbersome for those with larger boats such as rafts. In addition, this bridge was undersized for the floodplain at this location and one can see clear evidence of channel migration at this site, which has created and will continue to create a diverse mosaic of off-channel habitat that is important to the diversity of native fish species utilizing this river.

We urge the Forest Service to consider a range of options for this site and critically evaluate how river access can best be improved while providing greater protection for the river and preserving natural floodplain processes. Options that should be considered are: a longer bridge that spans the flood plain and includes river access along one side of the river beneath the bridge, decommission the bridge and restore riparian habitat but include a convenient access approach to the river that is carefully designed to reduce sediment input to the river, or decommission the bridge and seek an alternate site between river mile 11 and 12 that could provide improved public access.

Forest Road 25 Downey Creek Bridge

The bridge over Downey Creek at FR 25 mile 21.9 was damaged and may need to be redesigned or decommissioned. In considering alternatives for this site, river access should be addressed. Previously access was available from the Downey Creek trailhead by sliding down a long and steep muddy bank. In determining the future of the road in this area opportunities to provide more convenient river access near the confluence with Downey Creek that protects riparian soils, limits erosion, and provides safer access should be considered. We understand that currently the section of river from this site down to Boundary Bridge has numerous hazardous log jams but it's likely that boaters will return to this section of river at some point in the future as the wood hazards shift and a new channel course stabilizes.

Forest Road 22 Whitechuck River Bridge

This bridge provided access to one of the most important recreational access points for boaters on the Sauk River that has now been eliminated due to failure of the bridge. We recognize that the Whitechuck River and the area of the confluence with the Sauk River is particularly dynamic and attempts to rebuild the bridge and associated road required to reach the former access site could represent a significant challenge. Access to the Sauk River near river mile 32 is important to the recreational community and we would urge the Forest Service to consider creative options that would provide access to the river. One potential access site has been identified on the south side of the river off FR 20 and downstream of the Whitechuck confluence. There may be other opportunities for access sites that would eliminate the need to reconstruct the bridge and FR 22 and these should be carefully evaluated. Such alternatives could provide cost-effective access while eliminating the need for costly engineering solutions that would have a negative impact on riparian condition.

We appreciate your attention to these important sites for river access and look forward to working with you to develop sensible solutions that enhance visitor experiences while protecting habitat characteristics and scenic qualities of the river.

Sincerely,



Thomas O'Keefe

cc:

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