

Flood control work changed Long Tom

In the second of our series on the history of flooding and river development that occurred on the Long Tom and elsewhere in the Willamette Valley, we left off in 1936. The federal government had just passed landmark legislation that directed flood protection be brought to our area.

By PAUL REED
Long Tom Watershed Council

The Willamette Valley was where flood control would first become important to Oregon. In

1937, the state legislature organized flood control districts - local corporations - as a means to work cooperatively with the federal government. At that same time, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the first time evaluated the economic benefits that might be derived from systematic control of flooding throughout the Willamette system. Importantly, besides the primary flood control benefit, the study analyzed many types of other potential benefits within one coherent package: irrigation, hydroelectric power, navigation and "stream purification."

The economic pay-off of this proposal directly contrasted earlier river works assessments. It concluded that a flood of the 1927 level (80 percent of the 1861 flood of record) might be expected once every five years, and would cover 7,000 farms and 18 towns or cities, and that 3,000 homes and stores would be lost.

In addition to this flood level issue, the climate of the Pacific Northwest supplied the other key to the eventual design of the flood solution. Our dry summers and wet

winters were reliable fixtures - we have only one flood season per year under any circumstances. These two key pieces of information were fundamental to the Corps in determining that storage reservoirs were the optimum means by which to control flood flows in this region. In a painstaking effort, 78 locations were examined as possible sites for dams; the field was narrowed to 19 by plan-design and mapping exercises. After geological test-drilling, seven favorable locations were finally selected.

In 1938, Congress authorized

construction of the Willamette Valley Project, and it was hailed at the time as a model multi-purpose plan for utilizing water within a large river basin. Of the seven planned flood control reservoirs, the Corps started building three prior to World War II. Fern Ridge, on the Long Tom River, was the first to be completed and came on line in the fall of 1941. Cottage Grove, on the Coast Fork of the Willamette, was operating by 1942. The war interrupted completion of Dorena on the

See LONG TOM, page 18

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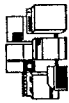
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Long Tom from page 17

Row River until 1949. Interestingly, events soon played out in the physical landscape, which dramatically altered the layout of the eventually built reservoir system. A series of storm events in the winter of 1942-43 produced an immediate flood control test at Fern Ridge, and resulted in a disappointing performance. The storage reservoir was uniquely sited on the flat valley floor, and the downstream river channel continued through this same wide floodplain. The downstream channel could not contain the flows passed through the dam as the storm event progressed and passed. A major channelization

along the mainstem of the Willamette. A major component of this was for erosion control in agricultural areas, though numerous bulkheads, seawalls, and other structures were built in urban settings.

Even then, Congress accepted and ratified the trade-off it was making between flood control and native fish, and looked forward to the fish passage improvements which might be possible in another day.

The project has done what it was envisioned to do. Since the completion of the thirteenth dam at Foster in 1968, the peak stages of floods have been lowered throughout the

downstream basin, and flooding due to the more-frequent lesser-stage events has been largely prevented altogether. The project has fulfilled its multiple purpose mandate - electric power and irrigation water has been widely and reliably marketed, and the pollution of the lower Willamette River is aggressively abated each summer. These things have greatly enhanced the livability of our region, but not without undesirable side-effects - some of which we are only beginning to understand.

Oregon's "model project" is as much a microcosm of what lays ahead, as it is a culmination of what

has gone before. The development and use of the region's water resources has always been a complicated and often controversial choice, and if 135 years is a guide, it is a continuing choice to be made as well.

Next time, last in the series: Oregon's model choices

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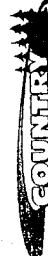
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