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TOP STORY

Mix of plants growing at new Fir Island marsh

By KIMBERLY CAUVEL @Kimberly_SVH Aug 26, 2017



Research scientist Greg Hood and Skagit Wildlife Area manager Belinda Rotton walk into the marsh at the Fir Island Farm restoration site Thursday to survey the plants that are growing in the area.

Jake Tull / Skagit Valley Herald

FIR ISLAND — Green plants and shimmering water have replaced the yellow-brown grains that a dike once shielded from Skagit Bay.

In the year since gaps were carved out of the dike to allow high tides to inundate 131 acres, an assortment of plants — some more welcome than others — have put down roots.

During a visit to the site Thursday, state Department of Fish & Wildlife staff and research scientist Greg Hood examined the plants growing throughout the restoration site.

Hood is monitoring where different plants are growing at the site. He will use the data he gathers — plant type, elevation and location — to create a model that will better predict what types of plants will grow following changes such as restoration work or climate change.

The site, called Fir Island Farm, is part of Fish & Wildlife's network of Skagit Wildlife Area properties throughout the region. Those properties are managed to protect wildlife such as endangered salmon and to provide recreation opportunities, such as waterfowl hunting.

While standing at the edge of a new dike that was built as part of the restoration project, Skagit Wildlife Area manager Belinda Rotton pointed to examples of native grasses that are good for marsh habitat and invasive cattails that can be problematic.

While there are areas where native grasses called sedges are thriving, the invasive cattails are more broadly distributed and could impede the site's purpose of benefiting fish and birds.

"It was definitely unexpected this quickly and at this level," Rotton said while looking out over part of the marsh peppered with young cattails.

Rotton and Fish & Wildlife staff are determining how to remove the cattails from the restoration area while limiting the impacts on the native plants.

"This is just the beginning. By next year it will be twice as tall and thick and crowd out the native plants (if we don't do anything)," Rotton said.

While Rotton waded nearly waist-deep through a thick patch of young cattails, an EarthCorps crew worked nearby on removing adult cattails growing just outside the restoration site.

Fish & Wildlife's Dave Heimer said those cattails were the source of the seeds for the cattails now growing in the newly exposed tidal marsh.

While surprised by the prevalence of the cattails, Rotton and Hood said they were also surprised by the presence of sedges so soon after opening the site to saltwater.

“This vegetation colonization is really rapid ... We’re looking at sedge, a grass-like plant that typically takes two to three years to come in. It’s surprising that it came in the first year,” Hood said.

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