



NEWS RELEASE



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September 18, 2008

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TEMPORARY FIRE RESTORATION CLOSURE

Habitat restoration on the Hanford Reach National Monument (Monument) will require the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to temporarily close about 14,000 acres north of the Columbia River beginning on or about September 22, 2008 and extending through mid-October. The White Bluffs boat launch access road will remain open, however travelers should expect delays during periods of project aerial operations.

The closure is needed to continue restoration efforts on over 77,000 acres of native shrubs and grasses burned in wildfires during the summer of 2007. Restoration work has been ongoing since December, 2007, with 30,000 acres treated for invasive weed control and 700,000 native upland and riparian shrubs planted so far. This fall, work will focus on aerial chemical treatments to control aggressive invasive species such as saltcedar, Russian olive and phragmites.

The Service will try to keep the area open on weekends during the project; however, weather conditions may require crews to work on weekends to complete the work before plants go dormant for winter. The closure area covers lands west of the Scenic Overlook and from the Columbia River north to Highway 24. While the closure may last up to 20 days, the Service is making every effort to finish the work sooner, weather dependent.

It is important that visitors heed closure signs for their own safety and for the safety of the crews conducting the restoration operations. Visitors may call the Service's Mid-Columbia River National Wildlife Refuge Complex headquarters at (509) 546-8300 for up-to-date information on closures during this rehabilitation effort, including potential weekend closures.

Aerial spraying operations will strictly adhere to state and federal laws and agency policies on herbicide application, such as use of herbicides approved for aquatic areas and use of buffer zones around private lands where chemicals will not be used. Chemical applications will only be made during periods with light wind, moderate temperatures and when no inversion layers are present.

On July 13, 2007, three lightning-caused wildfires quickly grew together into the Overlook Fire. Before it was contained, the Overlook Fire spread through 21,071 acres of shrub-steppe and riparian habitats, damaging the ecology and landscape by removing native shrubs and grasses from areas open to the public on the Wahluke Slope.

Immediately after the fire, a Burned Area Rehabilitation (BAER, pronounced “bear”) Plan was developed to address short- and long-term rehabilitation needs. BAER plans are typically developed by Service experts in consultation with Native American tribes and local technical experts, and often include actions such as aerial spraying for weed control, seeding native species, hand-planting native shrubs and hydro-mulching erosive soils along public roadways.

“We realize that these areas are popular with visitors,” said Greg Hughes, manager for the Monument. “However, our overriding concern for public safety and the safety of our employees and contractors make these temporary closures necessary. With fall chinook salmon sport fishing season underway, we are making every effort to keep access to the White Bluffs boat launch unimpeded during this project. These short-term closures will have long-term benefits to shrub-steppe habitat and ensuing recreational opportunities.”

While the ecological structure and function of the burned areas cannot be restored in a short period of time, these efforts jumpstart the recovery of ecological processes and habitat quality. Shrub-steppe is one of the slowest habitats to recover naturally, and without intervention, could take decades or longer to fully recover. Quickly halting the establishment and spread of invasive plants, and promoting native species establishment, will not only benefit native plants and animals, but will help prevent the area from being even more damaged by future fires.

“The Monument provides habitat for plant and animal communities that are in serious decline throughout the West, and it is important that we reestablish a functioning ecosystem as quickly as possible in support of these unique resources,” stated Greg Hughes.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.