



Backgrounder: Fish Screen Program

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, March 20, 2015

For as long as people have diverted water for crops, livestock, industrial, domestic, and other uses, fish living in streams have been diverted with the water into fields and other unsuitable places with no chance to escape. In recent years, Oregonians have spent many hours and millions of dollars to protect and improve fish habitat. With over 55,000 water diversions existing in Oregon, a large percentage of fish produced will encounter a diversion at some point during their lifecycle. Fish screens prevent fish mortality and injury at water diversions while still allowing the water to be delivered to its place of use.

FISH SCREEN HISTORY IN OREGON

In Oregon, this problem has been understood for over 100 years with fish screening laws showing up in 1898. From 1905 through 1946 and other periods of time, state law required water diverters to screen diversions. The statewide screening program began in 1947 when the Oregon State Game Commission, precursor to ODFW, embarked on an aggressive fish screening program. Through fish screen shops located in Central Point, Corvallis, John Day, and Enterprise, state funds were used to build and maintain hundreds of fish screens in Oregon. Federal mitigation from the construction of Columbia River dams was used to build and maintain almost 500 screens in the John Day Basin alone from 1952 to 1957. By the time of the Game Commission's merger with the Oregon State Fish Commission in 1975, to form ODFW, financial limitations resulted in the abandonment of most of these fish screens.

In 1991 the Oregon Legislature established a pilot cost-share program (ORS 498.306) for the construction, installation, and maintenance of fish screening devices at eligible diversions. This pilot program became permanent in 1995 and is still operating today to assist water users installing fish screens. In addition to the cost share program, water users may be allowed a tax credit for 50 percent of their net costs of construction (ORS 315.138).

The ODFW Fish Screening Task Force was formed in 1991 (ORS 496.085) to advise the Department on development and implementation of the cost-share program. This seven person public body is composed of three members representing agriculture, three representing fishing/fish conservation, and one representing the public at large. This group provides a great opportunity for public involvement in shaping how the screen program operates.

WHAT IS THE STATUS OF THE ODFW FISH SCREENING PROGRAM?

Water users and fish populations continue to benefit from this program. Over 1,400 fish screens have been installed with assistance from the ODFW Cost-Share Program since its inception in 1991. New screens continue to be installed every year throughout the state protecting sensitive fish populations. Fish screen technology continues to advance, providing multiple screen options to meet challenging site conditions and provide better fish protection. The program obtains funds from a number of state, federal, and private organizations to implement the Fish Screening Program. The success of this program relies on water users who volunteer to work with the department to install and operate fish screens on their diversions.

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE FACING THE FISH SCREENING PROGRAM?

A significant challenge facing the ODFW Fish Screening Program is the ability to install screens statewide. ODFW's primary source of funding is the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund provided through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Fish screens cost shared through these funds are restricted to waters that have species under NOAA authority, largely salmon and steelhead. While protecting these species from entrainment at diversions is a high priority, this leaves a large portion of the state that ODFW is unable to provide cost share assistance to water users. ODFW is required by statute (ORS 498.306) to be responsible for major maintenance of screen devices installed through the cost share program operating at sites diverting less than 30 cfs. These limitations in funding reduce our ability to provide fish protection and water user support throughout the state.