



PRINTABLE VERSION: Thursday, August 2, 2007

1. **ENDANGERED SPECIES: Oil spill leads to habitat protections for Pacific shore birds** (08/02/2007)

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The sinking of the New Carissa cargo ship off the Oregon coast nearly a decade ago has led to acquisition of a new habitat for the threatened marbled murrelet and other Northwest forest species.

In an agreement finalized this week, over 3,850 acres of forested land will be transferred from private timber companies to the Confederated Tribe of Siletz Indians to be managed as a habitat for murrelets. While the tribe will be allowed to continue commercial logging on about one-third of the property, the intent of the \$15 million deal is to secure nesting grounds for the threatened birds in perpetuity.



Feb. 1999 -- A U.S. Coast Guard cleanup crew works the beaches at Coos Bay, with the listing New Carissa in the background. Damage proceeds from the spill are being used to purchase a new habitat for threatened birds. Photo courtesy of USCG.

The 660-foot New Carissa ran aground near Coos Bay, Ore., in February 1999, spilling between 70,000 gallons and 140,000 gallons of fuel oil into the ocean and nearby beaches. Eventually, remaining fuel needed to be burned off, and the ship was scuttled just off the coast. The ship's owner, Taiheiyo Kaiun Co. of Japan, later tried to sue the federal government, claiming that the accident was caused by its reliance on outdated federal navigational maps and "inadequate oversight" by the U.S. Coast Guard. A settlement announced in June 2004 resulted in Taiheiyo Kaiun paying \$10.5 million for cleanup and restoration. About \$4 million of the settlement was earmarked to create murrelet habitat.

Another \$10 million for the acquisition comes from the oil-spill trust funds authorized by Congress in the wake of the massive Exxon Valdez spill. Trustees for the funds included agencies of the Department of Interior, the Forest Service, the state of Oregon and several Indian tribes, including the Siletz and the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Suislaw. The Bureau of Land Management was chosen as lead agency on

the project.

According to Larry Mangan, Oregon state director and project manager for BLM, the initial concern after the spill was for the survival of threatened snowy plovers, which congregate and nest along the beaches of the Oregon Dunes National Recreation Area. Although a few of the snowy plovers were killed by the oil spill, its effects were far more severe for other birds, he said.

In all, the oil spill killed nearly 2,500 seabirds, including 262 marbled murrelets, and over 670 other shorebirds were injured or died as a result of being coated with oil. The beaches and parks were closed to the public for weeks, and according to Mangan, about 29,000 visitor days were lost as a result of the spill, with the economic loss estimated at \$400,000.

After a few years of studies to characterize and assess damages from the incident, the trustees chose a plan that would try to acquire up to 1,200 acres of habitat lands.

The surprise, Mangan said this week, was the availability of properties that were perfectly suited for murrelets. "We had never realized the amount or quality of the tracts," he said. "This is probably some of the best habitat left in the United States."

The lands came from two large timber companies, Plum Creek and Forest Capital partners, which acquired its lands from Boise Cascade in 2002. Tim Holt, Western division manager for Forest Capital Partners, said this is the first such deal for the firm, which transferred 3,600 acres of its 600,000-acre Oregon portfolio. "We hope it will motivate others to explore similar transactions," Holt said. He promised that the rest of the company's lands would continue to be managed in a sustainable manner.

Federal officials praised the firm for "going far beyond" minimum standards and state laws for protecting murrelets and other species as part of its forest management practices but also sighed with relief that the lands will be secured in perpetuity. "This is a way to permanently protect the future," said BLM's Mangan.

The land in question is already home to at least 17 nesting sites for the murrelets, although there was no firm count of how many birds might nest there. Initially, 1,269 acres will be devoted to the habitat, while the tribe will work toward doubling its size over time.

Delores Pigsley, who serves as chairman of the Siletz tribe, said that the addition of 3,850 acres more than doubles the amount of land currently set aside for the tribe. Before the reservation was established, however, the Siletz occupied more than 1.4 million acres, she noted. "This is part of the land we initially owned, and we're glad to have it back," she said. "We'll take care of the land, as usual."



Marbled murrelets have a new home near the Oregon coast that will be managed by the Siletz Tribe. Photo courtesy of USFWS.

The tribe will devise a management plan in coordination with state and federal agencies. Currently, the tribe's timber lands are on a 60-year cycle for timber harvesting, but what the plan will be for the new tracts is still to be determined. A core area of about 2,400 acres will be managed specifically as habitat, while the rest of the land will serve as buffer property that may be logged as long as disturbances of the birds are minimized.

Stan Speakes, regional director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, expressed support for the selection of the tribe to manage the habitat. "They were the first ecosystem managers," he said.

Other projects

While the murrelet habitat deal was the focus of attention this week, there are several other projects that have benefited from funding via the New Carissa oil-spill settlement.

Though four to eight snowy plovers died from the incident, the New Carissa Trust will work with local conservation partners to restore and maintain a plover habitat over 30 years to rebuild the threatened population.

Land might also be acquired to expand a seabird colony as part of the Oregon Islands National Wildlife Refuge, and educational programs are being set up for Oregon teachers regarding shoreline ecosystem health and bird protections. Numerous shoreline recreational projects have also been funded.