

Reopen Road? Maybe. Protect Environment? Certainly.

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In March 2004, the U.S. Forest Service announced plans to rebuild and reopen the washed-out Dosewallips River Road.

Now, the road may remain closed forever.

In announcing its decision, the Forest Service said it had completed an environmental assessment and was satisfied a re-routed road section could be constructed without adverse effects. But three environmental groups appealed the decision, and the Forest Service set aside its plans and agreed to do a full-blown environmental impact statement.

Since then, some of the original environmental concerns have been compounded, and new ones have arisen.

A 300-foot section of the road washed out 10 miles west of Brinnon, and about 5 miles from the Olympic National Park Boundary, in January 2002. In subsequent years, the washout increased to about 600 feet.

Initially, the Forest Service was considering rebuilding the existing road section, but after its environmental assessment, it opted instead to construct a new road segment on the slope above the washout. That plan was dropped due to concerns about the stability of the slope, the loss of old-growth habitat and effects on the northern spotted owl, listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act.

In addition, the National Marine Fisheries Service informed the Forest Service that rebuilding the road could have "dire consequences" for chinook salmon, another threatened species. Fisheries officials said the road washout and continuing erosion has added significant amounts of gravel to the river, and biologists reported improved salmon-spawning habitat downstream from the washout.

But although the environment is the most critical area of concern, it's not the only issue at stake. In 2001, nearly 27,000 people visited the Dosewallips Campground and trailheads in Olympic National Park. Thousands of others visited Elkhorn Campground and other trailheads lower down the road in Olympic National Forest. Many of the visitors were elderly or handicapped, and wouldn't be able to reach these areas except by motorized vehicles.

Currently, visitors bound for Dosewallips Campground face at least a 5-mile hike, beginning with a steep bypass trail around the washout, then dropping back to the roadway. However, the road beyond the washout also has deteriorated, with three large rockslides and eight large blowdowns blocking the route.

At this point, issues remain unresolved. In the next couple of weeks, the Forest Service will release its draft environmental impact statement, which includes options ranging from repairing the road to leaving it closed.

Despite the uncertainties, a couple of things are clear.

One is that environmental groups' early concerns were well-founded; issues are considerably more complex than were first believed.

The other is that if the road can be rebuilt in an environmentally sound manner, it should be.

The bottom line: Reopening of the road would be pointless if it means damaging the forest and river environments to which it provides access.