

Conservationists Object to Road Construction Through Old Growth Forest: Dosewallips Road Fix Threatens Ancient Trees & Endangered Salmon

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Conservationists objected strongly today to a plan by Olympic National Forest and the Federal Highway Administration to reconstruct the upper Dosewallips Road through a stand of ancient trees bordering a wilderness area. A request by conservation groups to consider an option that would convert the upper section of road to a hiking, biking and equestrian trail was rejected by the agencies.

In an environmental statement made public on June 9, Forest Service officials announced three options for rebuilding the washed-out Dosewallips River Road. Two would construct a bypass road through an old-growth forest adjacent to the Buckhorn Wilderness. One would construct a bridge over the 500-foot washout. A no-action alternative would continue current non-management. The Dosewallips Road provided motorized access to two campgrounds and hiking trails in Olympic National Forest and Olympic National Park.

Conservation groups charge that bypass road construction would be costly, environmentally destructive, and unnecessary. The nearly mile-long road would be constructed across a steep, wet, unstable slope. Dozens of ancient trees would be logged in the process, some reaching six feet in diameter. Costs could run in excess of \$4 million. Bridge construction along the river would cost more than \$8 million.

All three road-building options would be in violation of the Northwest Forest Plan, the law that preserves old-growth forests and wildlife habitats in Northwest federal forests.

"Relocating the Dosewallips Road through some of the most spectacular old-growth forest in the east Olympics just doesn't make sense," says Donna Osseward, president of Olympic Park Associates. "Ensuring public access is a worthy goal, but destroying irreplaceable forest and putting federally threatened salmon and wildlife at risk to do it is unacceptable," she said.

Olympic Park Associates and Olympic Forest Coalition plan to challenge the final decision. According to Bonnie Phillips, executive director of the Olympic Forest Coalition, the agencies have ignored public support for converting the road beyond the washout to a year-round recreational trail. "Conversion of the upper road to a family-friendly hiking, biking and equestrian trail is the only sensible solution for the Dosewallips. But it's a solution the Forest Service refuses to consider."

Problems with the Dosewallips Road began in January 2002, when record floods swept away a 300-foot section of road ten miles west of Highway 101 at Brinnon. Repeated floods over the intervening years have nearly doubled the size of the washout. Prior to 2002 the road accessed the Elkhorn campground in Olympic National Forest and Dosewallips campground in Olympic National Park as well as two park trail heads. The park campground and trail heads can now be reached by a scenic five mile hike along the river. The Forest Service campground is less than a mile past the washout.



- Connie Gallant

Two earlier Forest Service plans to rebuild the road were challenged by conservation groups and withdrawn. The current plan fails to consider trail conversion as an option. In the meantime, no effort has been made by the agency to establish parking, horse unloading, or camping facilities downstream from the washout.

Federally listed Puget Sound Chinook salmon are known to spawn in the area, and the cut slope exposed by the river has been identified as a significant source of spawning gravel for Chinook. Federally listed Hood Canal chum, Puget Sound steelhead, and bull trout are also present in the Dosewallips. Critical habitat for threatened spotted owl and marbled murrelet habitat also occurs in the project area, but no recent surveys have been conducted for these species.

"There's just no way to restore motorized access to the upper Dosewallips without irreparable harm to the environment," says Osseward. "The only responsible course is to convert the upper road to a non-motorized trail,"

"This road is an artifact of the 1930s," says Phillips. "Climate change and continuing floods are a fact of life now. Forest service officials have an opportunity to plan for meaningful, long-term recreational use for this spectacular valley. Instead, they remain stuck in the past."

"We have an opportunity to have two campgrounds without vehicles running through them," adds Osseward. "That's great for families and youth groups."