

Moving day for deer

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CATHLAMET — With their home in danger of potential flooding due to erosion, several dozen Columbian white-tail deer are in the process of being captured and relocated from the Julia Butler Hansen [JBH] Wildlife Refuge near Cathlamet to a new home at the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge this week.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [FWS] is working in conjunction with the Washington and Oregon departments of Fish and Wildlife, as well as the Cowlitz Indian Tribe and local veterinarians to make the capture and relocation successful.

Broken dike means danger for deer

Steamboat Slough dike — built in the 1920s and owned and maintained by Wahkiakum County Diking District #4 — runs along along the Columbia River boundary of the refuge. The dike is eroding and has a probability of failure — a breach could inundate the refuge mainland and place the approximately 100 Columbian white-tailed deer inhabiting the refuge at extreme risk.

According to the FWS website, managers believe that in the event of a breach and subsequent flooding, the majority of these deer will be displaced or die.

This erosion did not happen overnight. On the contrary, over time the river channel has deepened along that portion of the river, creating “a hole underneath the rock that was placed to protect the dike, causing the rock (rip rap) to slide away,” said Wahkiakum County Public Works Director Pete Ringen in the Longview Daily News last spring.

“(There is a real) risk of a deep-seated mass failure which could suddenly cause the whole dike to simply slide away into the river,” said Ringen.

Although the shipping channel has been deepened near that location, it’s unclear whether dredging was a factor in the erosion.

Steamboat Slough Road, which runs on top of the dike, has been partially closed since last spring due to the erosion, and essentially cuts the loop road in half.

Although technology exists to fix the impending dike breach, the FWS says there are no funds available for the effort at this time. Plans for a longer-term remedy are under consideration by FWS but cannot be completed in time to prevent a potential dike breach this winter.

Last spring, the FWS estimated the cost of the restorative project to be in the range of \$2.7 and \$4.5 million.

Endangered deer on the move

Following the completion of an environmental assessment for the emergency translocation of the deer from the JBH Refuge to the Ridgefield Refuge, trapping began on Jan. 29. Teams of refuge employees and volunteers staked out fields equipped with large drop nets, baited with food for the deer. Once a deer comes under the net it is electronically dropped on top of the deer, trapping it.

Last Thursday afternoon in a field adjacent to Hwy. 4, a pair of deer were netted, causing a mad dash across a 100-yard field by the FWS team to subdue the deer and log their information before transferring them into narrow wooden boxes for transport to their new home. The deer were also fitted with a radio collar for tracking and an ear tag. Last week a total of eight deer — three fawns, one yearling buck and four adult does — were trapped and transferred. Up to 50 Columbian white-tail deer — which are listed as endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act — will be transplanted from one refuge to the other.

Established in 1972, the Julia Butler Hansen Refuge is home to nearly 300 total Columbian white-tailed deer, which are spread out over refuge lands that include the Tenasillahe, Hunting, Crims and Wallace islands in the Columbia River.

The FWS is yet to decide if the dike is repaired whether or not they would try to return the translocated deer back to their original home near Cathlamet.