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Wildlife-friendly bridges recognized

The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) recognized Hamilton Construction Co., a contractor for the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) on the OTIA III State Bridge Delivery Program, for environmental enhancements in rebuilding the McKenzie River bridges on I-5 near Eugene, Ore.

"These are well-executed bridges that improve conditions for Townsend's big-eared bats, salmon, and steelhead," said Ron Anglin, ODFW Wildlife Division administrator. "Working with individuals that exhibit the level of dedication and concern for wildlife that Hamilton Construction does is gratifying."

During a pre-demolition inspection, inspectors found colonies of Townsend's big-eared bats in both the northbound and southbound bridges, part of Bundle 215, I-5: McKenzie River (Spores) to Goshen Grade. The bat is a state sensitive species and a federal species of concern that uses cavernous spaces such as the old McKenzie River bridges for habitat. Since the new bridge design lacked open cavernous spaces, ODFW staff was concerned that the bats would likely abandon the site.

To address the concern and come up with a cost-effective solution, ODOT's construction project manager, Tim Dodson, pulled together a team comprising David Leal, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Simon Wray and Jim Muck, ODFW; Kristine Marshall and Brian Nicholas, David Evans and Associates; and Brian Bauman, Oregon Bridge Delivery Partners.

Together, the team members designed, approved, and developed an inexpensive, innovative bat box design for use between the I-beams of the new bridges. ODOT agreed to monitor these boxes to determine the amount and type of bat use. If successful, these efforts will not only maintain a valuable roost site for Townsend's big-eared bats but also result in a bat box design that can be used on other bridges across the state.

In addition to the bat boxes, Hamilton proposed an environmental enhancement to protect spring Chinook salmon, a native to the McKenzie River and listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. The company removed 800 yards of riprap—used to protect embankments from erosion—from around the existing bridges. This action will allow the stream to move naturally within the floodplain under the bridge and improve rearing conditions for the fish. It is well above the requirement to meet the fluvial performance standards of the new bridge design.

"This is a pretty river and it makes sense to take good care of it," said Con O'Connor, construction manager for Hamilton. "This has been a successful project because of a bunch of people working together to make a lot of good decisions."

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