

Slide sends silty sludge down Bayside's Jacoby Creek

Agencies say landslide is from failure of old logging road

John Driscoll, Eureka Times-Standard, 6-5-10

Earlier this week, Jacoby Creek turned the color of chocolate milk.

While there has been a lot of rain recently, old-timers who live in the watershed said they've never seen it run so muddy. In the past few days, officials have found the source of the heavy silt, a landslide that started on an old logging road on a tributary of Jacoby Creek called Monahan or Golf Course creek.

Now they are trying to figure out how to stem the flow of mud from the collapse, especially since salmon are taking the brunt of it in the estuary before heading out to sea. The slide is on private property above the Baywood Country Club Clubhouse Restaurant, according to e-mails sent between California Department of Fish and Game personnel. Fish and Game Environmental Scientist Scott Bauer wrote that water had been pouring from a cut bank onto the old road, which made the road fail.

"The hillslope is very steep ... and this failure will continue to discharge sediment for some time," Bauer wrote.

Those who live along the creek are mostly concerned about having the problem fixed.

"Finding out whose fault it is, is secondary," said Melanie Faust, who also works for the California Coastal Commission and contacted several agencies to alert them to the problem. "They just need to figure out an intervention strategy."

CalFire investigated, since it had issued a non-industrial timber management plan on the property. But CalFire Forest Practice Inspector Heather Brent said that she's determined the slide is well outside the boundaries of the timber plan and unrelated.

The National Marine Fisheries Service's law enforcement branch also checked into the situation. Because there are federally protected fish in the creek, NMFS has jurisdiction to charge a landowner for activities that result in harm to the fish. But agent David Reilly said that there are thousands of sites like this around the county, remnants of decades-old forest practices for which the current landowners aren't to blame.

"There's nothing you can do from an enforcement end," Reilly said.

Registered forester Andy Elsbree went to look at the site, which he believes has been an active slide for perhaps thousands of years. He estimated that another 500 cubic yards of material could slough off into the creek -- it's just a question of when. He said that an excavator and a bulldozer could be brought in through a neighboring property to move the material in question.

There are a number of organizations ready to help if they are called upon. Arcata Environmental Services Department Director Mark Andre said that the main concern is for the fish in the estuary. He said the city and a number of volunteers are ready to go to work if needed, and bring in silt fences or equipment to the scene.

"We're willing," Andre said.