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OPINION

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OUR VIEW

Neil Creek salmon project working

While irrigators on the Columbia and Snake river system are pressuring the Trump administration to overturn salmon-protection measures, closer to home a small-scale project on a small stream is getting results.

Under an agreement between NOAA-Fisheries and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, stream restoration work has brought juvenile coho and chinook salmon back to Neil Creek, a tributary of Bear Creek near Ashland. The project, on a mile-long stretch of the creek that runs through a private ranch, is designed to create new and deeper pools to provide the cold water that fish need during summer months. The work will keep the Talent Irrigation

District and others from losing federal permits necessary to continue operating. The permits were at risk because irrigation districts must operate without harming wild coho, whose habitat is protected under the Endangered Species Act.

One year after the restoration work was completed, state fish biologists counted 109 juvenile coho and 79 wild fall chinook juveniles in a survey finished last week. Since 2002, previous surveys had found exactly one juvenile coho, and chinook juveniles were unheard of. The Columbia-Snake river system is enormous, and battles over protecting fish runs there involve lawsuits seeking the removal of multiple dams. Irrigators who object to

federal protections hope the Trump administration will agree to convene what is known as the "God squad," a committee with the power to grant exemptions to environmental regulations.

The God squad has met only three times, the last a quarter century ago, and has not always ruled against protections. The last time it met, the committee granted an exemption to protections for the northern spotted owl, allowing some timber sales to proceed. It's unclear whether the God squad will be convened, or if it is, whether it will issue the ruling the irrigators want. But here in southern Oregon, the Neil Creek project shows protection methods are working.