



Auburn Environmental Park Project

Historical Overview

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Wetlands are comprised of three components: hydrophilic (water-loving) vegetation; hydric (wet) soils, and hydrology (water). A wetland can take decades, and sometimes even centuries, to flourish and become fully functional. Once a wetland is fully functional, the wetland vegetation and soils provide a means to improve water quality by filtering out heavy metals and other toxicants from the water before it continues on to a stream; wetlands serve as a catchment for excess storm water to help control flooding; and wetlands provide habitat to a wide variety of wildlife species. Historically, wetlands seldom held much value—they were considered wastelands that could only become valuable if drained. The area comprising the Auburn Environmental Park was no exception to this wide-held belief.

Prior to 1853, the area comprising the Auburn Environmental Park was mostly marshy, natural lands inhabited by indigenous peoples. Settlers began arriving in the Auburn Valley around 1853, making land claims under the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850, and later the Homestead Act of 1862. The settlers would clear any timber and use the land mainly for subsistence farming, animal feed, and dwellings. Flood protection at the time consisted of 1858 legislation that allowed the settlers to construct levees along riverbanks and dig drainage ditches to drain the wetlands. By 1894, the Valley floor was predominately used for agriculture, except for the wettest areas.

Major road improvements and construction began occurring around 1870, with the roadbeds being placed on natural levees for the best drainage (including Main Street, the southern boundary of the Auburn Environmental Park). With the introduction of hops in the late 1880's and continuing expansion of overland transportation, the Auburn Valley became an important agricultural service center. The Northern Pacific and the Great Northern Railroads, which came through central Auburn in 1883 and 1893, respectively, along with the facilities that were developed in the Valley for the storing, drying and processing of hops, resulted in the area becoming a leading population center for the period.

Impacts to the Auburn Environmental Park wetlands would have been very localized during this period. Production demands for hops and other cash crops led to the increased amount of drained wetlands area that accommodated fields for growing, thereby decreasing the overall area of wetland systems. Because roads during this period were generally dirt and puncheons, or corduroy bridges, surface runoff flow was not impacted and wetland areas were not generally isolated.

1901-1950

When the hop-louse infested Auburn Valley hop crops in 1892, crops were ruined and abandoned, then later dug out and room made for new cash crops. These new cash crops included fruits, potatoes, seed crops, and horticultural crops. Truck farming and dairy products were also part of the area industries. This shift from subsistence farming to cash crop production may have been a result of increased Japanese and European immigration into the area. By 1920 more than 1,000 Japanese farmers cultivated over 25,000 acres throughout the state, and those located throughout the Valley operated some of the peak production farms until the Alien Land Act of 1921, which forced them to hold their lands under their children's names. Growing populations throughout the Puget Sound region provided insatiable markets for the farm and dairy products of the Valley, in turn sparking growth and expansion in Auburn to accommodate these markets. Wetlands were drained or filled, streams were channelized, and rivers were dammed to protect the crops and fields from flooding. Cash crops remained the Valley's primary industry until around World War II when heightened aerospace and other defense industry developments occurred and Japanese farmers were sent to internment camps and their lands taken.



It is likely that the Trott Family Farm, whose fields were located in the southeastern portion of the Auburn Environmental Park along Main and Western Streets, once yielded the famous White River Potato. Property of the White River Valley Museum.



Milwaukee Rail Train
Property of the White River Valley Museum

In the early 1900s motor vehicles were introduced into the Valley and competed with trains for passenger and freight transportation. Since area industries required transportation improvements and expansions, the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul line was completed through Auburn (eastern boundary of the Auburn Environmental Park) in 1909 and 1915 had introduced two-lane hard-surfaced highways with good bridges into the Valley, to include West Valley Highway (western boundary for potential second phase of Auburn Environmental Park). Auburn was selected as the home of Northern Pacific Railroad's West Coast repair yard. Facilities were also developed in Auburn to meet cash crop market

expansion, including Borden Company, a condensory, and Libby's, a canning/packing plant. During World War II, Auburn was also selected as home to one of Boeing Aircraft's plants.

During this period, area growth continued at exponential rates which impacted the Auburn Environmental Park wetlands in several ways. First, construction of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul line filled, diked, and divided the wetland system from north to south, leaving portions east and west of the railroad. Then, further dissection of the wetland system occurred when dirt-filled roads replaced corduroy bridges. Finally, continued agricultural and light industrial land use diminished the size, function, and values of the original wetland system.



Main Street Resurfacing (1934)
Property of the White River Valley Museum

1951 - Present

Once the Auburn Valley entered the last half of the 20th Century, the area seemed to grow in leaps and bounds. The Valley changed from an area predominantly used for agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s to an area that became predominantly developed with the array of industrial and retail/commercial buildings now seen today. Although many factors played into the change, three are more prevalent: Howard A. Hanson Dam construction; improved transportation infrastructure construction and freight rates; and the purchase, aggregation, and development of land in the Valley for industrial and large-scale commercial purposes.

Industries near Seattle desperately needed to expand to meet market demands, but were limited due to available land. South was the only available direction to go, but the area suffered from inadequate flood control and drainage. The remedy proposed: Howard A. Hanson Dam. The dam was completed in 1962, providing the Valley its much-needed flood control. But drainage still remained an issue, so in 1966 Congress approved the Federal Soil Conservation Service's plan to construct 55 miles of drainage channels designed to collect and carry run-off. With the water at bay, the Green River Valley saw the rapid disappearance of truck farming and the emergence of industrial plants, shopping centers, residential development, and vacant land.

Although Auburn was serviced by four transcontinental railways (Northern Pacific; Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific; Great Northern; and Union Pacific), there was still a need for an improved transportation network for the area's industries and growing population. In 1953, State Route 167 (current western boundary of the Auburn Environmental Park) was designed and construction approved. State Route 167 was completed through Auburn in 1972 and supported by State Route 18, completed around 1960, that ran east to west. The northern boundary of the Auburn Environmental Park, 15th St. NW, was not completed until around 1975. The new freeway, as well as decreased freight rates and the Washington State Free Port Tax Law (1969), encouraged the location and development of distribution warehouses in the Valley.



With the construction of the Howard A. Hanson Dam and State Route 167 came the corporations purchasing agricultural lands for future industrial development. Because the land could now be used for other purposes, the land values increased, and thus the associated taxes, pressuring the small farmers into selling their land. Between 1960 and 1980 over 9,000 acres of the Valley's prime agricultural land was converted to other uses or vacant land, or was filled or covered with impervious surfaces. But not all of the land was developed right away and by 1971 over one-third of Valley land was vacant or unused. Eventually, the area became known as an "industrial breadbasket to the world" having evolved into a way station for American goods to be distributed throughout the Northwest, for domestic goods waiting for export, and for goods imported from Pacific Rim nations.

Residential land use also increased during this period as the Valley underwent a population explosion. While the Valley floor was being converted to industrial uses, the East and West Hills of Auburn were residentially developed. Mill Creek, which lies between the West Hill and the Valley floor, supplies water to the Auburn Environmental Park. Because storm water run-off increases with impervious surface areas, impacts to the flow and drainage of nearby streams were inevitable, and Mill Creek was no exception. Culverts placed under State

Route 167 to aid Mill Creek's flow eventually became clogged, overflowing the stream banks and flooding lower lying areas to either side of the freeway. This process is what caused the Auburn Environmental Park area to begin its transformation from unused land to emergent wetland.

It was also during this period, towards the latter part of the 1960s, when federal and state governments began showing concern for the environmental impacts of development. The newly implemented laws attempted to eliminate or limit discharges of pollutants or dredged or fill material into the nation's waters, particularly "special aquatic sites" such as wetlands, by requiring permits from the Army Corps of Engineers for such activities. One law from this period, the Clean Water Act, which has undergone several amendments and revisions since its inception, is still enforced today.

The Auburn Environmental Park probably suffered the greatest amount of damage during this period. Construction of State Route 167 not only divided the wetland system further, but also caused a portion of it to be filled. Continued development, especially industrial development, also impacted the large system as the land was filled so that building foundations could be laid. Pollutants, although somewhat regulated, were discharged into Mill Creek and other surrounding tributaries that eventually found their way into the wetland system. These activities continued to exacerbate the wetland's diminishing size, functions, and values.

The Future

In 1972 Congress enacted the Clean Water Act. Although the Act has been amended and revised several times since then, it still remains the primary regulatory document controlling the activities in the nation's waters. The Clean Water Act, regulated by the Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Ecology, requires that any developer impacting more than ½ acre of wetland must mitigate the impact. In complying with the federal and state laws, the City of Auburn has implemented their own wetland mitigation requirements for developers. The City requires that for every acre of wetland impacted at least 2 acres must be enhanced or created. Auburn wetland mitigation enhancements and creations require that all three wetland components are present, and usually require a 3- to 5-year monitoring period to insure the wetland changes are successful. Auburn has experienced high success rates for wetland mitigation, partially due to the already existing "wetland" conditions covering most of the Valley floor.

The middle portion of the Auburn Environmental Park, called the Thormod Wetland, was a wetland created under this mitigation requirement. In the mid-1990s, Auburn was chosen as the site for a new horse-racing track, Emerald Downs. Because the new track would impact numerous acres of already existing wetland, the developer was required to mitigate the impacts by creating/enhancing a new wetland area. As part of the mitigation, the developer was also required to grant a conservation easement of the area to the City of Auburn. It was through this easement and other later purchases that the entire area for the Auburn Environmental Park came into City possession.

Around the turn of the 21st Century the State of Washington began looking at the bigger picture: Through the continuing growth and development of the state near and around its waterways, there has been a marked decline in salmon populations and habitat, so much so that certain salmon species are now listed as being threatened under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. As a result, a consortium of Valley cities, as well as King County, developed a salmon habitat restoration plan for all waters within the Water Resource Inventory Area 9 (WRIA 9). This ongoing project proposes to restore salmon habitat within the Green/Duwamish and Central Puget Sound watershed, which includes Mill Creek and the area contained within the Auburn Environmental Park. Most of the Environmental Park area acquired by the City of Auburn has sat unused and vacant for over 30 years, all the while healing and growing hydrophilic vegetation. The City's goal is that the Environmental Park lands will be nurtured until its health returns and once again provides habitable waters.