

## A fresh start?

John Driscoll/The Times-Standard

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### Experiment first step in potential estuary rehabilitation

Biologists propped open an old tide gate in Freshwater last week as part of an experiment to see if they could partially recreate a tidal wetland that hasn't existed there for 100 years.

The idea was to watch how much of the land between a pasture and Myrtle Avenue near Freshwater Corners floods at various tides. Biologists aimed to compare that to computer models outlining the inundation from Freshwater Slough, as part of a project that may restore some of the characteristics of Freshwater Creek's former estuary.

"We're just going to be taking it slow," said Jeff Anderson of Jeff Anderson and Associates, a consultant for the project.

In fact, the tides, starting with a 6-foot tide Monday, didn't produce as dramatic an effect as was expected. As the tides got higher throughout the week, the channel of little Wood Creek raised significantly and brackish water washed into side channels.

Biologists were also monitoring salinity and dissolved oxygen, trying to see what conditions might be like for protected coho salmon and tidewater gobys. A few young coho have been found in Wood Creek, which is all but cut off from Freshwater Slough by the old tide gate.

The project is part of an effort by the Northcoast Regional Land Trust, which bought 54 acres from Freshwater Farms' Rick Store in July of 2005. Freshwater Slough is fixed in place by dikes, which don't allow the stream to meander like it would -- and once did -- naturally. The complex channels and backwater areas are important rearing grounds for salmon, where they grow before migrating to the ocean.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service have paid for designs and monitoring of the project. The California Coastal Conservancy and the Department of Fish and Game have also contributed. As part of the agreement with Freshwater Farms, Storre will be able to collect seeds for his native plant nursery. Cattle are also grazing on the part of the property.

"We wanted to use the property as a showcase for agricultural and resource protection, recreation and education," said Erik Wilson with the land trust.

Wilson said the hope is to remove the tide gate next fall, and possibly excavate some of the area to allow it to become flooded during high tides.