

THE MOUNT VERNON ARGUS

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USDA Looks at Our River

Uncle Sam has his eye on our Skagit river, it was announced in Washington, D. C. last week. This should be a warning signal for all Skagit residents to start thinking about this river, its uses, the problems it creates, and how it should be regulated, if at all, in coming years.

What is to take place is a study of the Skagit by the U. S. Department of Agriculture, to determine whether or not it should be included in the national wild and scenic rivers system. The USDA has a similar assignment for six other streams; the U. S. Department of Interior at the same time will be looking at 18 rivers. The two agencies are required, by a 1968 act of congress, to make the studies and coordinate their work so as to come up with a unified opinion at the federal level.

What is involved for the future is a decision as to whether or not one or all of these rivers shall be formally declared "wild" or "scenic" and severe restrictions placed on any developments in or along their waterways. The idea behind the "wild" or "scenic" stream is to preserve it in as nearly as possible its natural, free-flowing state and to block any developments that would change its character as a work of nature.

Of vital interest to the Skagit valley may be the effects of any such designation of the Skagit on present and future means of preventing or controlling floods. Would the entire stream be placed in a strait-jacket or only its upper reaches? Could there be exceptions, should it be determined at the local level that additional diking may be needed, or a flood control dam on a major tributary, such as the Sauk river?

The best long-time answer to Skagit valley flood control has long been considered a dam on the Sauk, assuming that the Corps of Engineers can find a suitable site. The Corps has said many times that a Sauk dam is the best means for control of a 100-year flood. Such a dam has not been too seriously considered in the past because it would be difficult to justify from an economic or "benefit" standpoint. But, if population and business activity grow in this valley as is being forecast with increasing validity, the picture could change rapidly as to the level to which flood control benefits could rise.

As of the present time, this newspaper looks with favor on protection of our river's scenic and natural attractions, with one important reservation: Placing an irrevocable ban on upstream flood control works could place us in the position of possibly paying too big a price for the Skagit's natural beauty—widespread destruction by flood.

The federal government timetable calls for completion of the river studies between September, 1970, and December, 1973. It would appear timely for the county commissioners to ask the county flood control council to undertake concurrent studies of future flood control needs, the necessity for which could be strongly advocated if and when the USDA might conclude the Skagit watershed should be kept completely "wild" or "scenic".