



Current Reflections

Issue 20, October 2007

Historic Opportunity at Hand for Salmon

An historic opportunity is at hand to put the Northwest's prized wild salmon and steelhead, listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act, on the path to recovery. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)-Fisheries, the federal agency responsible, will submit its new draft salmon conservation plan on federal hydrosystem operations to U.S. District court Judge James Redden on October 31st.

The federal fish protection agencies are also analyzing the effects of Columbia River commercial, sport and tribal fishing on endangered salmon and steelhead. The confluence of these two actions – hydrosystem and harvest - provides reason for optimism that all of the key links in the salmon recovery puzzle will finally be connected.



NOAA's draft **hydrosystem** salmon plan will draw heavily from recommendations submitted in September by the federal agencies that own and operate the dams: Bonneville Power Administration, U.S. Army Corps, and Bureau of Reclamation.

Their proposals did a very solid job of identifying all the issues affecting listed fish. These agencies have a plan to address two of the key links to protect salmon and steelhead: dam operations and habitat improvements. Over \$1.5 billion from electricity consumers will be invested over the next ten years, with millions going to new fish slides at the dams to help move young fish downstream; plus changes in hydrosystem operations. Over \$425 million is earmarked for habitat improvements in key tributaries and the Lower Columbia estuary, and \$30 million to control predators like birds and sea lions.

The federal action agencies' recommendations to NOAA were based on a scientific analysis unprecedented in its rigor. The analysis looked at factors impeding fish recovery for each individual listed stock at every stage of its lifecycle – as each migrates to and from the Pacific Ocean.

The analysis created a roadmap to recovery by comprehensively analyzing all the major factors affecting listed fish: hydro operations, habitat degradation, hatchery over- production and harvest. (Ocean conditions are thought by some scientists to account for nearly 70% of salmon mortality. Salmon spend the majority of their life in the ocean, a habitat over which we have no control).

But the proposals in the plan submitted to NOAA only addressed two of the four key links in the chain of species recovery: coastal and inland habitat restoration and the operation of hydroelectric projects in the Columbia River basin.

It is now up to NOAA-Fisheries to take the information from the scientific roadmap handed it and apply it to the remaining two links: hatcheries and harvest. Where the other federal action agencies did not have authority to address these areas in any detail, NOAA-Fisheries absolutely does. NOAA can fill in these key blanks when it issues its draft Biological Opinion to Judge Redden October 31st.

And, because NOAA is simultaneously developing a new **harvest** management plan for commercial, sport and tribal fishing in the lower Columbia River, it can and should apply this information to that draft Biological Opinion.

This seems straightforward, but it is not. While NOAA-Fisheries is the agency ultimately responsible for the protection and conservation of listed fish species, it also is the agency responsible for allowing commercial and tribal harvest of these same listed fish.

Therein lies the rub.

These conflicting mandates put the agency in a conundrum. How can it ensure there are continuing harvest opportunities while also putting listed salmon and steelhead on a path towards recovery? The simple answer is that NOAA must follow the science and use the robust analysis available to it to enact the hatchery and harvest reforms clearly needed.

It would be a political nightmare for NOAA to attempt to cut off harvest altogether and no one is calling for that at this time. However, there are common sense actions that can be taken to reduce harvest pressure on listed stocks. These include reducing the mass production of hatchery fish which results in listed fish being harvested along with hatchery fish at unsustainable rates; and, movement towards more selective harvesting techniques. NOAA clearly has the assignment to bring a comprehensive approach to putting listed salmon and steelhead on a path to recovery. It must have the will to do so.

The current science assessment indicates that almost all endangered fish stocks are rebuilding. Now is the time to take advantage of this momentum and enact a truly comprehensive approach to salmon and steelhead recovery. While there is reason for optimism, it will not be an easy task to take the significant steps still needed in the controversial areas of hatcheries and harvest.

Link to BiOp overview: <http://nwriverpartners.org/documents/BioAssessmentOverview.pdf>

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