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Salmon solution: \$1 billion plan

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P-I REPORTER

The most expensive, far-reaching strategy for saving Puget Sound salmon ever devised is out for public scrutiny.

The voluminous Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Plan proposes doubling spending on salmon recovery -- a commitment of more than \$1.1 billion in federal, state and local funds over the plan's first 10 years. The anticipated payoff: big jumps in chinook populations throughout the region.

MAP: WATERSHEDS

[View a map](#) of some projects and goals for four of the watersheds covered by the Puget Sound Salmon Recovery plan (PDF, 295K).

"It's the first time I've been given reason to hope we can reverse the losses," said Curt Hoetling, a Whidbey Island resident and former Alaskan commercial fisherman.

"The work is ahead, but just getting to this point ... is to me inspiring and extraordinarily encouraging," Hoetling said in remarks at a Seattle public meeting Wednesday night.

The plan is the culmination of years of work spent developing strategies for rebuilding the Sound's chinook, bull trout and Hood Canal chum populations. In 1999, the fish were declared "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act.



As the plan goes forward, people in the Seattle area can expect to see:

- Removal of riprap, sea walls and other shoreline-hardening features in favor of more natural beaches.
- Protection of remaining natural shorelines, with trees planted to improve shade.
- Placement of log piles in rivers and streams to create pools harboring young salmon.
- Replacement of pipes that carry streams under roads so salmon can reach better spawning grounds.
- Work to make docks and the Ballard Locks more salmon-friendly.

zoom

Mike Urban / P-I

Washington Conservation Corps workers are reflected in Des Moines Creek as they plant trees Tuesday to restore the waterway,

Support for the effort comes from diverse interests, including dozens of cities, counties, business interests and conservation groups. But not everyone is onboard -- and even supporters aren't sure that there is enough money and momentum to get the job done.

Key Seattle-area tribes have been absent in the process, leading to concerns over the likelihood of success without their participation. There are also unresolved issues surrounding the negative effects of hatchery fish on wild fish recovery.

Some critics have questioned the wisdom of investing millions in healing rivers flowing through urban areas, rather than diverting money to pristine streams where recovery seems more likely.

And no one is sure how climate change could disrupt the effort. A failure to adequately plan for a warmer world was one of the key criticisms raised at Wednesday's meeting.

In recent years, warmer temperatures have already harmed Seattle-area salmon populations passing through the Ballard Locks and into Lake Washington.

Even though the plan was put together by local interests, the ultimate responsibility for safeguarding salmon to satisfy the Endangered Species Act falls to the National Marine Fisheries Service. An agency spokesman said the final version should be approved by the end of the year. The plan addresses 15 watersheds, each with a textbook-sized chapter of its own.

"It's an important milestone," said Mary Jorgensen, King County coordinator for salmon recovery in the watershed that includes Lake Washington, Lake Sammamish, and the Cedar and Sammamish rivers.

Local government officials hope a federally sanctioned plan will shield them from potential lawsuits alleging that they aren't doing enough to bring back chinook runs. They believe it could improve their chances of getting more money from state and federal budgets to get costly restoration work completed.

Over the decade, restoration work in the Green and Duwamish rivers could reach \$300 million, while improvements in Lake Washington, the Cedar and the Sammamish could reach \$170 million. The funds come primarily from county and city utilities and other tax sources, local grants, state and federal salmon recovery funding boards, and state and federal grants.

Organizers hope local taxpayers won't really notice any impact on their pocketbooks. King County officials were in Washington, D.C., on Thursday trying to secure money from Congress and said the talks were going well.

Locally, officials hope to redirect money already being spent on environmental protection into salmon recovery, said Jim Kramer, executive director of Shared Strategy, the non-

profit group coordinating development of the plan. Officials also hope to attract funding from private philanthropic foundations.

The goals are lofty. In some watersheds, the chinook population target is more than 50 times that of its current size. For the Cedar, the plan strives to increase the number of chinook from a recent annual average of 400 returning fish to as many as 8,200 to reach sustainability.

At a time when the Endangered Species Act has been under assault for purportedly being costly and ineffective, the plan's supporters say it could be a model for pulling species from the brink. They say it represents an effort that started within the affected communities rather than coming from the federal government. It balances environmental needs with economic and social realities.



 zoom

Mike Urban / P-I

"You can have the Endangered Species Act work in an urban area and you're not going to shut down industry," said Doug Osterman, King County coordinator for salmon recovery in the Green and Duwamish. "We worked this thing out together."

Planting trees like these along the Des Moines River improves shade. Salmon require cool water.

'It's pretty neat'

A scaly invasion is under way along a stretch of the Cedar River.

For decades, acres of river bank near Cedar Grove Road were filled in and blocked off from the flow of the river, which runs from the Cascade Mountains into Lake Washington.

But thanks to a half-completed restoration project that broke ground in August, juvenile chinook, coho and sockeye salmon and trout are already nosing their way into streams carved into the flood plain.

One night last week, Dan Eastman, a fish biologist helping guide the King County-led restoration project, went in search of these tiny colonizers. Snorkeling the channels with a flashlight, he found "silvery blobs" less than 2 inches long. Many of the blobs were chinook.

"It's pretty neat," he said.

The \$150,000 project should be completed this summer. It is too early to declare the partially finished restoration of 8 acres owned by the county and the Renton Lion's Club a success. But it is a hopeful sign that the excavating, replanting and placing stumps and logs in the flood plain are going to help salmon.

For the Cedar, the No. 1 priority is restoring flood plains where small fish can take refuge from the quick flow of the river, find food and avoid predators. It is also one of the top goals for salmon recovery on the Duwamish and Green.

"You've got to get those babies to survive," Osterman said. "You're losing them."

Hatchery role explored

Hatchery fish are also taking a toll on the wild salmon in the Duwamish. In recent years, millions of chinook from the Soos Creek Salmon Hatchery outside of Auburn have been released into the river while wild chinook were present.

Scientists found that the wild chinook grew more slowly after the river was flooded with hatchery fish. It is also possible that the wild fish were eaten by the larger hatchery salmon.

The state Department of Fish and Wildlife, which operates the hatchery, is reviewing its practices at Soos Creek and elsewhere to improve hatchery operations and reduce harmful effects on wild salmon.

"There's a role for hatcheries in salmon recovery and sustainable fisheries," said Sara Laborde, the department's salmon recovery coordinator. "But you need to be clear about what your objectives are for those hatchery programs."

Another area awaiting resolution is the recovery role of some local tribes, which share salmon management authority with the state.

Muckleshoot spokesman Rollin Fatland said the tribe is "reviewing what has been put out" and would not immediately comment on the plan or concerns about the tribe's lack of participation.

Supporters of the plan are optimistic that the strategy can succeed. They defend efforts to save the urban fish and not rely solely on salmon in more rural watersheds to come charging back. The Endangered Species Act protects all of the fish, urban officials said, making them legally obligated to help in recovery. And if a disaster occurred in one river, it's important that others are healthy to keep the population afloat.

"Each of the watersheds have a role to play in getting to recovery," said Brian Murray, a salmon-recovery expert for King County.

After all, despite decades of development, pollution, overfishing and environmental damage, the salmon have hung on.

Said Murray: "These rivers are not ready to give up yet."

TO COMMENT

- To read the draft Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Plan visit:
www.sharesalmonstrategy.org Comments are due by Feb. 27. Details for submitting comments are in the Federal Register at
www.sharesalmonstrategy.org/plan/docs/FRN.pdf
 - For more information, call the National Marine Fisheries Service's Elizabeth Babcock, 206-526-4505, or Elizabeth Gaar, 503-230-5434.
 - Another meeting on the plan will be held at 6 p.m. Feb. 21 at the Northwest Educational Service District, 1601 R Ave., in Anacortes.
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See the P-I's environment page at www.seattlepi.com/environment P-I reporter Robert McClure contributed to this report.

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