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Is Chinook Recovery Plan Up to the Task?

- **Some remain optimistic, while others wonder if Puget Sound residents are ready to face the significant challenges.**

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When it comes to saving salmon, every restoration project counts. But after spending hundreds of millions of dollars on salmon recovery, the Northwest has yet to secure the future of the mighty chinook — the king salmon.

Experts are just beginning to recognize the level of public commitment it will take to avoid a death spiral that could leave only remnant salmon runs, like the isolated buffalo herds in the West.

A recovery plan for Puget Sound chinook, now under public review, is said to be the most complex recovery plan in the history of the Endangered Species Act. The plan suggests doubling the current rescue effort in Puget Sound, protecting far more habitat and boosting annual expenditures from \$60 million to \$120 million.

But with an estimated 1 million new people expected to arrive in the Puget Sound region within 15 years, even that may not be enough.

Robert Lackey, a fisheries biologist with the Environmental Protection Agency, said the public frequently hears an optimistic message when experts discuss Northwest salmon.

"But when I talk to these same people, one on one, off the record, they don't strike me as being optimistic at all," he said.

Shoreline conditions

When Lee Stirrett built a new home near Seabeck, he refused to live with an ugly bulkhead between his house and his fabulous view of Hood Canal.

A team of local experts replaced a deteriorating stone wall with a row of buried boulders, dressed up his yard with large landscaping rocks and created an easy slope to the beach.

"We wanted to get the house as low as we possibly could," Stirrett said, "and we didn't want a bulkhead."

The attractive shoreline conditions pleased not only Stirrett, but also salmon biologists. Young salmon could now migrate through this area, even at high tide, without facing treacherous deep water where predators dwell. Waves no longer crashed against a wall; they dissipated gradually by rolling up the slope.



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Hatchery supervisor Jon Lovrak holds chinook fry on their way to Coulter Creek Hatchery.

Stirrett recently sold his waterfront home. But his beach project stands as a tiny step forward in salmon restoration, a rare improvement on private property along Kitsap County's shoreline. The number of similar projects over the past few years can be counted on one hand, said David Greetham, shorelines manager for Kitsap County.

While the county largely prohibits adding new bulkheads to undeveloped shorelines, waterfront property owners are allowed to replace old ones. With nearly a third of Kitsap's waterfront lined with rock and concrete, healthy shoreline conditions are a distant dream.

Chinook salmon generally spawn in larger rivers, such as those that originate in the Cascade or Olympic mountains. The Union, Tahuya and Dewatto rivers are the only streams on the Kitsap Peninsula believed to harbor potential spawning habitat for chinook. Although Kitsap's streams may be rarely used by chinook, Kitsap's shorelines have been designated "critical habitat" by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The peninsula's location at the center of Puget Sound makes it a throughway for salmon. Juvenile fish hug the shore, moving from estuary to estuary on their way to the Pacific Ocean.

The Army Corps of Engineers once contemplated a massive shoreline-restoration project throughout Puget Sound, but congressional funding never materialized. More moderate projects have been funded, including estuary projects at Belfair State Park in southern Hood Canal.

The city of Bainbridge Island last year completed a habitat assessment along its shorelines, and Kitsap County is scheduled to follow suit with a two-year survey starting this summer. The study may identify a need to impose stricter shoreline regulations, which the county plans to revise within five years, said Rick Rutz, the county's natural resources coordinator.

"The biggest contribution Kitsap County can make (to chinook recovery) is in its nearshore," he added.

Shorelines are so important to chinook recovery that scientists have written a separate 246-page shoreline analysis as part of the Puget Sound Chinook Recovery Plan.

Chinook on brink

Biologists have identified 22 independent chinook populations remaining in Puget Sound. They believe at least 15 other groups have already gone extinct. The total number of individual chinook returning to Puget Sound rivers is estimated to be one-tenth of historical levels, and some runs are as low as 1 percent.

A plan to save the chinook from extinction could have been developed by the National Marine Fisheries Service, known as NMFS. But this massive plan — 5,000 pages if you include all appendices — was designed by county and city governments, with guidance from the nonprofit Shared Strategy for Puget Sound. NMFS assumed a supportive role.

"My own personal view," said Mary Ruckelshaus, who heads the Technical Recovery Team for NMFS, "is that there are many draft salmon plans out there that have gone nowhere, because they were written by academic and government scientists. I'm a really a strong believer in the way we did this plan."

The theory is that the "bottom-up" approach will encourage local governments to not only describe what they should do to save salmon, but also encourage them to follow through with commitments. Fourteen separate plans focus mostly on local efforts to save salmon in various watersheds throughout the region.

Ruckelshaus said some plans are better than others at attempting to predict long-term trends. Restoring habitat, reducing fishing impacts and boosting wild salmon populations help counteract landscape alterations due to growth, she said, but tools to measure the net change are still being developed. Because the 14 sections were written separately by local governments, they show little connection to each other.

"The collective thing," said Jim Kramer, executive director of Shared Strategy, "is that everyone is working together to provide a measured outcome."

Salmon experts are mapping existing conditions and identifying what it would take to reach desirable conditions. Recovery goals for chinook populations have been identified for the major rivers, but it could take time to determine if the region is moving forward or backward on the path to recovery. Goals are outlined for the next decade, but recovery is targeted at 50 to 100 years.

"There is a great deal of uncertainty," Kramer said. "Can we increase the habitat by 20 percent while growing by a million and a half people over the next 20 years? That is not something that has been done before. But I'm convinced we can to it."

The East Kitsap chapter of the plan relies mainly on existing regulatory and protection programs. It also identifies efforts to better manage hatcheries and harvest. A key section analyzes "gaps in information, processes and resources." These "gaps" inject uncertainty about whether Kitsap is on a path toward recovery or extinction.

"There is a general lack of funding for local government to support natural resource programs," the plan acknowledges. "This is particularly true of non-mandated efforts such as Shared Strategy ..."

Kathy Fletcher, executive director of the environmental group People for Puget Sound, said the recovery plan generally reflects what local governments are willing to do rather than what they need to do.

"I think a lot of it is general enough and voluntary enough and unfunded enough that we really don't know what will result," she said.

Kitsap County had the chance to increase its shoreline buffer from the existing 35 feet last year when it updated its Critical Areas Ordinance, she said. Some environmentalists called for as much as 150-foot buffers. Despite significant improvements, Fletcher said it was disappointing that the revised ordinance failed to deal with shorelines.

Kitsap County is far from alone in addressing the big issues, Fletcher said.

"It always comes back to funding and political will," she noted. "Many of the tough decisions seem to have been ducked. There's a funny gap between the things judged to be politically feasible and what the salmon need. Another 20 years might go by before we say, 'Oops, we didn't make it.'"

American Indian tribes in the region are reacting in various ways to the recovery plan. Many tribes have been involved in drafting local plans, but differences in location, governmental makeup and cultures have resulted in strange bedfellows.

"The tribes, by and large, want to be supportive of this, especially if it does something about habitat," said Chris Weller, a biologist with the Point No Point Treaty Council. "It will take monitoring, assessment and evaluation to see how effective the regulatory efforts are. It really

gets difficult when you try to pin down whether something as large and complicated as this is going to work."

Salmon 2100

Lackey, the EPA biologist, found it disconcerting to hear a lot of happy talk about saving Northwest salmon despite economic pressures, increasing population and continuing demands for natural resources. To assess the future of Northwest salmon, he joined with Denise Lach and Sally Duncan, both of the Center for Watershed and Environmental Sustainability at Oregon State University.

Together, they enlisted the help of about 30 other experts to create a stark, emperor-has-no-clothes look at the next 100 years. Their findings, due out this summer as a book called "Salmon 2100," include 24 options for maintaining salmon as an enduring symbol of the Northwest.

Options include:

- Technological interventions, such as changing the definition of "wild" salmon and maintaining stocks artificially.
- Salmon "zoning," such as focusing salmon recovery in some areas and allowing other areas to be overrun with population.
- Behavior changes that result in less per-capita demand for land and resources, such as building smaller homes or concentrating populations in urban areas.

"There are no big surprises for people who have worked with salmon a long time," Lackey said, "but right now it doesn't appear that society at large is willing to make such drastic changes."

Lackey said the official goal of the project was to "elevate the rigor of discussion" about the future of salmon, but he had a personal goal of his own.

"When 2100 comes around, I don't want anyone to look back on what happened and say, 'I wish someone had told us in 2006 that this is where we were headed.' People have choices. They may not want to spend all this money on a failed effort that will not bring back salmon."

Brad Ack, executive director of the Puget Sound Action Team, a state agency, said Gov. Chris Gregoire understands the challenge and has raised the bar even higher. Her Puget Sound Initiative calls for not only saving salmon but restoring the ecosystem for all species.

Gregoire formed the Puget Sound Partnership, a group of prominent individuals, and asked them to take a year to plot a course of action that will work.

"We've got to do a really good job of education and outreach," Ack said. "People take care of the things we care about. We take care of our homes, our children, our possessions. People care about the natural environment, but I don't think they realize how threatened it is."

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