

Scientists criticize salmon plan

Federal proposal won't save crucial White River chinook run, critics say

SUSAN GORDON; The News Tribune

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The federal agency that's supposed to protect endangered salmon endorsed an effort to bring back Puget Sound kings even though the plan fails to meet the agency's own recovery criteria.

Despite shortcomings cited by its scientific team, the National Marine Fisheries Service embraced the so-called "Shared Strategy" proposal in December as the core of its plan to revive salmon runs listed as threatened with extinction.

Politicians have praised Shared Strategy for bringing various interest groups together.

But the team of seven scientists who reviewed the Shared Strategy plan on behalf of NMFS found a number of faults, some of which are at the heart of conservation efforts.

In a document that supplements the Shared Strategy plan, the scientists noted numerous "gaps in local watershed plans." A key deficiency in the South Sound is the lack of a plan to save the wild spring run of chinook salmon in the White River. It's the only surviving spring run in the South Sound, so scientists say it must be saved.

Mary Ruckelshaus, a NMFS fish biologist who leads the agency's technical recovery team, said the overall plan is acceptable but the White River gap is "one of the more glaring ones" that must be addressed. Her father, William Ruckelshaus, a former Environmental Protection Agency administrator, is one of the driving forces behind Shared Strategy.

"If we don't recover White River spring chinook, we don't meet the goals of spring chinook in general," she said. "It's the only remaining early run in the South Sound region. That's why it's so critical."

Similarly absent from the recovery plan – although deemed less significant by NMFS scientists – is a game plan for Puyallup River chinook. A strategy for fall chinook on the Skokomish River also is not included.

Shared Strategy is a nonprofit group that spearheaded a local, regional, tribal and state effort to restore Puget Sound king – also called chinook – salmon.

The Shared Strategy plan was supposed to incorporate the efforts of representatives from 14 watershed planning areas. Throughout Puget Sound, 22 populations of chinook salmon are at "high risk" of extinction, scientists said. Between 11 and 15 populations have already disappeared.

The aim is to provide a road map for a \$1.4 billion, 10-year effort seen as the first leg of a journey to salmon recovery that could take up to 100 years. As it is, about \$60 million is spent annually to recover Puget Sound salmon.

LIKELIHOOD OF SUCCESS QUESTIONED

Federal officials listed Puget Sound chinook salmon as threatened with extinction under the Endangered Species Act nearly seven years ago. The law requires federal officials to figure out a way to bring them back.

NMFS commissioned a scientific team to establish the framework for the overall salmon-revival strategy, help guide separate watershed groups and critique the results. Comments from the scientists are part of both the Shared Strategy document and the NMFS supplement.

The scientists said the Shared Strategy plan's likelihood of success is diminished by the inadequacies of individual watershed plans.

On its own, Shared Strategy doesn't sufficiently map out ways to save the chinook that pass through Lake Washington, or others that spawn in the Skagit and Green rivers, the supplement states.

Bob Lohn, the NOAA regional administrator responsible for the recovery plan, said he's satisfied Shared Strategy can work if revised as needed. "We accepted it as locally developed, where the region would like to go and where it thinks it can go," he said.

As for the plan's failure to set recovery goals for stocks such as White River spring chinook, Lohn said: "The people in that area weren't ready to agree on them."

Local and regional revisions continue, and if Shared Strategy doesn't come up with a plan at some time in the future, NMFS will, Lohn said.

"If the parties are unable to reach an agreement it will fall to us to set a goal," he said.

COMPETITION FOR WHITE RIVER WATER

The federal agency's recovery criteria emphasizes preservation of remaining native runs, specifically "at least one population from each major genetic and life history group historically present."

That means no other South Sound run can substitute for White River spring chinook.

Even so, the Shared Strategy plan doesn't include a blueprint for the recovery of White River spring chinook. But it does say that between 1987 and 2001, an average of only 329 of the wild fish returned to spawn in the river.

Representatives of Pierce County, the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, and two American Indian tribes were expected to collaborate on recovery planning for the White and Puyallup river watersheds.

But the Muckleshoot Tribe did not participate. Pierce County turned in its own habitat plan. And the Puyallup Tribe of Indians and state fisheries officials together produced a document focused primarily on hatchery and fishing issues.

When NMFS published the technical recovery team's tentative recovery goals, nothing was proposed for the White River.

"There were huge issues of trust between the parties," said Bill Graeber, a salmon ecologist who works with Mary Ruckelshaus on the technical recovery team.

This is despite the fact that since the late 1970s, the Muckleshoots, state fisheries officials, and others have cooperatively hosted a captive breeding program to supplement wild spawning of the White River's early chinook run.

The Muckleshoot reservation straddles the White River, along the 20-mile segment where the flow of water has been reduced by diversion into Lake Tapps and – until recently – through Puget Sound Energy hydropower generators.

White River spring chinook could benefit from changes in diversion practices, Graeber said.

"But nobody wants to take action to secure that water," Graeber said.

After Cascade Water Alliance asked for state authority to tap White River water using the Puget Sound Energy diversion, the Muckleshoots and the Puyallups separately appealed. The Alliance plans to supply White River water to up to 600,000 people in communities east of Seattle.

Rollin Fatland, a Muckleshoot tribal consultant, refused to comment when asked why the tribe did not participate in Shared Strategy. But he said tribal officials are looking over the documents.

'EVERYONE'S WORKING TOGETHER'

Graeber said the proposals submitted for the White and Puyallup watersheds provide a foundation for recovery, but do not constitute a strategy. "There never has been a policy directive by any of the parties to put all the information together in a single plan," he said.

"The good watershed recovery plans we have go from actions to results. That's a huge leap," he said.

Some Shared Strategy groups, notably the Nisqually and Snohomish watersheds, largely succeeded. "The rest trail out in a continuum behind that," he said.

Debby Hyde, Pierce County special project coordinator who worked on Shared Strategy, said the county wasn't obliged to participate, but willingly took part. "Everyone's working together. There's just a phenomenal amount of energy and cooperation," she said.

Bill Sullivan, environmental director for the Puyallup Tribe, said Shared Strategy "passes the red-face test."

"It's a huge cookbook," he said. "It's a matter of how we start implementing it."

more on the plan

Find the proposal online:

www.sharedsalmonstrategy.org/plan/index.htm

How to get involved:

The deadline for public responses is Feb. 27.

- Write: Elizabeth Babcock, National Marine Fisheries Service, Salmon Recovery Division, 7600 Sandpoint Way N.E., Seattle, WA 98115
- E-mail: PugetSalmonPlan.nwr@noaa.gov, with "Comments on Puget Sound Salmon Plan" in the subject line
- Fax: 206-526-6426 white river spring chinook

Significance: Genetically, the most distinctive stock in central and south Puget Sound

Spawning grounds: Upstream of Mud Mountain Dam and in such tributaries as the Clearwater River, Greenwater River, Huckleberry Creek, Boise Creek and potentially the West Fork White River

What's the difference? Early-run chinook migrate upstream in April and May and spawn in August and September. Late-run chinook head upstream in late summer and spawn in the fall.

Efforts so far: In 1977, when fewer than 50 wild spring chinook returned to the White River to spawn, state, tribal and federal officials initiated a rescue effort. They began a captive breeding program and planted

young fish in the watershed to encourage their return. Nearly 1,000 fish returned to the river in 2002 and 2003, but it's unclear how many were hatchery fish.

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