

Landmark salmon plan a work in progress

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The regional leaders who banded together four years ago to spearhead a Puget Sound salmon recovery plan knew a monumental task lay ahead of them.

They also knew it would be like taking a road trip with a carload of people and no driving directions. Everyone knows the destination, but has a different idea about how to get there. Ultimately, whoever is piloting the car settles the argument.

In the case of salmon recovery, that driver is the federal government, or more specifically, the National Marine Fisheries Service. The agency's scientists say the regional plan submitted last year missed a few important turns. One of the most significant misses was the lack of a plan to save the only surviving spring run in the South Sound, the White River's spring run of chinook salmon.

The gaps came as no surprise to those scientists, who were involved in the extensive process that produced the salmon recovery plan. They knew of the gaps even as NMFS tentatively endorsed the plan last year. They also knew the limitations of the collaborative process that produced it.

The Puget Sound plan was developed by hundreds of stakeholders in 14 watersheds extending from Mount Rainier to the Canadian border and the Cascade Mountains to Neah Bay. Local governments, farmers, tribes, environmentalists and developers — groups that often on the opposite ends of discussions about how to save endangered salmon — came together to develop something that would work for them all.

They largely succeeded. The 4,000-page plan — produced under the auspices of the nonprofit organization Shared Strategy for Puget Sound — proposes to help restore imperiled salmon runs by retooling hatcheries and dams, protecting wetlands and flood plains and restoring feeding grounds.

Just as important as what it says is how it was written — by people who live and work in the 14 watersheds who have pledged to put the measures into practice. The Puget Sound plan is an important departure from how salmon recovery planning has been done in the past, with federal scientists mandating remedies to local communities.

Any collaborative process is bound to have gaps, places where consensus proves elusive. In the case of the White River, planning was hampered by Muckleshoot Tribe's decision to not participate. They were the lone tribal holdout; 16 other affected tribes participated in writing pieces of the plan.

Without the Muckleshoots on board, the other groups — Pierce County, the state and the Puyallup Tribe — charged with working together on the White and Puyallup river watersheds failed to produce a comprehensive plan. Complicating matters is strong competition for White River water. The tribes have opposed the plan by group of King County water utilities to tap White River water — water that could help fish.

Something as controversial as salmon recovery cannot be accomplished solely by compromise. When nothing else works, the federal government reserves the right to use its hammer. Regional leaders no doubt were relying on having that backstop in case their efforts fell short.

Shared Strategy's grassroots effort moved the region miles toward a broad and workable salmon-revival blueprint. That success will not be diminished if NMFS uses its authority to nudge Puget Sound stakeholders even further.

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