

Feds back plan to save Sound's salmon

LES BLUMENTHAL; The News Tribune

Last updated: January 6th, 2006 06:13 AM (PST)

WASHINGTON – The Bush administration has tentatively endorsed a 10-year, \$1.2 billion plan developed by a coalition of local groups to rebuild dwindling chinook salmon runs along Puget Sound.

After a six-month internal review, the National Marine Fisheries Service is seeking public comment on the recovery plan that covers 14 watersheds along the Sound, including the Nisqually and Puyallup rivers.

"This plan is certainly unusual – if not unique – in that it was generated almost totally from the local level," said Brian Gorman, a spokesman for the fisheries service in Seattle.

On a watershed-by-watershed basis, the 502-page plan focuses on preserving the existing habitat that salmon need to survive and on restoring lost habitat. It's heavy on guidelines and goals, and light on specific fixes.

Puget Sound chinook salmon were listed for protection under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1999. The coalition, known as Shared Strategy, has been working on a plan since then.

Today, the Sound has 22 chinook runs. Scientists believe at least 15 others have gone extinct. The salmon returning to spawn number about only 10 percent of historic levels and, in some watersheds, only 1 percent.

The effort to restore the chinook runs comes as the human population swells.

The Puget Sound region is expected to grow by about 1 million people in the next 15 years – or roughly the equivalent of adding a metropolitan area the size of Portland.

Recovery plans for endangered species are typically written by federal agencies with varying levels of local participation.

The plans often are controversial, and many end up being challenged in court.

In an effort to avoid those pitfalls, state and local government officials formed the Shared Strategy coalition.

Among those involved in writing the salmon recovery plan were federal, state, tribal and local governments; members of the business community; representatives from the agriculture and timber industries; environmental and conservation groups; and private property owners.

Local officials say they aren't surprised the National Marine Fisheries Service endorsed the plan.

"We expected it," said William Ruckelshaus, a former head of the federal Environmental Protection Agency who has helped spearhead the effort to restore Puget Sound salmon runs. "Having them participate from the beginning was essential."

Ruckelshaus said the key was having all sides involved.

"When we started it was very stiff, accusatory," he said. "A lot of these groups have been in court. But then they start to listen to each other."

GOAL: BOOST RUNS BY 20 PERCENT

Before endorsing the plan, federal scientists reviewed it to ensure it complies with the Endangered Species Act.

"The plan provides a roadmap for implementation of recovery actions in the Puget Sound Basin of Washington state," the agency said in a Federal Register notice last week announcing a 60-day public comment period.

The plan covers the 16,000-square-mile Puget Sound basin, the second-largest estuary in the United States, and encompasses all major river systems originating in the Cascade and Olympic mountains.

"NMFS' goal is to restore endangered and threatened salmon to the point where they are again secure, self-sustaining members of their ecosystems and no longer need the protections of the Endangered Species Act," the agency said.

The plan hopes to increase salmon populations by about 20 percent.

It emphasizes preserving and restoring in-stream salmon spawning habitat. It also calls for improving salmon habitat in flood plains and other riparian areas.

In addition, the plan seeks improvements in water quality, including increasing stream flows where needed; removing dams, such as those on the Elwha River, along with culverts that impede salmon migration; carefully managing salmon fishing; and overhauling the hatchery system.

In some watersheds, parts of the plan are already being implemented, said Ruckelshaus, the conservationist. But unresolved controversies remain in others.

PRICE TAG: \$120 MILLION A YEAR

About \$60 million a year is now being spent on the recovery effort. The price tag for implementing the plan doubles that to \$120 million a year.

About 85 percent of the money would be spent on capital projects and the rest on monitoring and other activities.

The money is expected to come from federal, state, local and private sources.

But U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Belfair, cautioned that federal funding has become increasingly hard to secure, pointing out that Congress recently cut funding for the West Coast Salmon Recovery Fund by almost \$23 million.

"I don't know how we will do it," Dicks said. "We've had a hard time getting money for current initiatives. The state is going to have to step up."

Dicks said the "bottoms-up" approach to developing the plan should help ensure its implementation.

The salmon recovery plan, he said, was just a piece of restoring the overall health of Puget Sound.

The fisheries service is expected to finalize the plan in early 2007, said Gorman, the NMFS spokesman.

"There is a practical as well as a political advantage to having these plans developed locally," he said. "They weren't created in a dark, smoke-filled room. This has been a remarkable success in bringing together disparate groups and having them agree to a plan."

Les Blumenthal: 202-383-0008

lblumenthal@mcclatchydc.com

Originally published: January 6th, 2006 02:30 AM (PST)