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Salmon recovery plan approved

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The federal government formally approved a recovery plan Friday for the Puget Sound chinook salmon, which are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The blueprint to keep chinook from extinction is the largest and most comprehensive recovery plan completed under the endangered species law, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The plan was crafted by Shared Strategy for Puget Sound, a coalition of citizens groups and local, state, tribal and federal representatives.

"Developing the plan has helped to build strong bridges between all of us who care about the salmon," said Billy Frank Jr., chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission.

The plan calls for spending \$1.2 billion in the next 10 years, a doubling of current efforts, to boost chinook runs by 20 percent.

"Scarce dollars need to be spent very wisely to keep the public's confidence and trust in what we do," said Jeff Koenings, director of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Harm from habitat loss, overharvest, competition with hatchery fish, pollution and other forces has eliminated about 15 of the 37 native chinook runs in Puget Sound. In some rivers, surviving runs are barely hanging on.

In South Sound, the recovery plan's emphasis is on protecting and restoring estuaries and nearshore habitat for salmon.

Across the sound, chinook recovery will require tougher land-use restrictions for population growth and development; 1.4 million more people are expected to live in the Puget Sound basin by 2020.

Recreational and tribal fishers will be asked to do even more to reduce their harvest of naturally spawning chinook to aid recovery, and hatchery management will be rearranged to protect wild fish, the recovery plan shows.

Scientists have suggested that chinook runs could return to 80 percent of historic levels if all people do their part to implement the recovery plan during the next 50 years.

About \$50 million of the \$220 million in new money to clean up Puget Sound in Gov. Chris Gregoire's 2007-09 budget is aimed at salmon habitat restoration work.