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Salmon rescue plan takes giant step forward

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P-I REPORTER

The best hope for saving Puget Sound chinook salmon got its official blessing Friday from federal officials responsible for protecting endangered species.

The challenge is huge: to reel salmon back from their precipitous decline, boosting population sizes tenfold or more while the equivalent of two Seattle's worth of people move into an already populous region, building homes and paving green spaces all around the Sound.

The price tag is steep. The effort could cost \$1.1 billion by 2015.

But the level of enthusiasm is high -- and it's widespread.

This is "a shining example" of what can happen when diverse, local groups come together and craft a recovery plan, said Bob Lohn, head of the Northwest regional office of the National Marine Fisheries Service, the agency that approved the plan.

"It's been a long, arduous process," said Joan McBride, deputy mayor of Kirkland. "It started many years ago, and I think this is a day to celebrate."

"The plan adopted today puts us on the right track," said Allison Butcher, chairwoman of the Puget Sound Endangered Species Act Business Coalition, a consortium of transportation, development, energy, real estate and construction industries.

For five years, groups including business owners, tribal members, environmentalists, scientists, farmers, government workers and elected officials met around the region devising recovery plans for salmon.

The strategies were tailored to match the needs of the residents and the landscape of 14 river basins around the Sound.

They were driven by the desire to solve at the local level the problem of vanishing salmon. No one wanted the federal government to come in and dictate a recovery plan.

Then all of the watershed plans were compiled into an overarching blueprint for recovery. The plan fulfills a requirement of the Endangered Species Act and was deemed "the

largest and most comprehensive" recovery plan ever approved by the federal government, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

And still the hardest work lies ahead.

"The big challenge is implementation," said Doug Osterman, a King County employee coordinating salmon recovery in the Green and Duwamish rivers and along 90 miles of marine shorelines. "We're really going to rely on state and federal governments to come through with the funding."

In recent years, local, state and federal governments have provided about \$60 million annually for projects that help salmon, with each contributing about \$20 million. That's not enough, experts said.

"We are currently spending about half of what is necessary to recover the salmon," said Jim Kramer, executive director of Shared Strategy for Puget Sound, the non-profit group formed to coordinate and lead the effort to create the plan. "This has to ramp up over time."

Gov. Chris Gregoire recently announced that she'll include \$50 million in her budget to make streams and seaside areas more hospitable for fish.

Getting more money could become a little bit easier with approval of the plan. Over 10 years, the strategy spells out clear steps for helping salmon, steps backed by scientific research.

The groups implementing the plans in the 14 regions around the Sound have gone through an exercise to prioritize which projects are most important. They have selected a set of projects that they hope to complete within the next three years.

Many restoration projects have been started and some completed since Puget Sound chinook, Hood Canal summer chum and Lake Ozette sockeye were declared threatened in 1999.

In the Duwamish River, an emphasis has been placed on making the waterway safer for small salmon. Decades ago, the river was straightened and dredged to accommodate industrial activities. That eliminated wetlands and shallow, protected stretches where young salmon heading from the river to the Sound could seek refuge and acclimate to the salt water.

So a \$4.5 million project is under way to rehabilitate a former industrial dumping ground in Tukwila located on the shores of the Duwamish.

"It's going to be a mudflat area, so when the tide comes in from the Duwamish, it has shallow slow-moving water for salmon to hide out and eat bugs," Osterman said.

In the city of Normandy Park, Osterman is working on a project with about 15 property owners to remove a shoreline wall of giant boulders and concrete stretching one-quarter mile along the Sound. The wall has cut off the flow of sand and dirt toward the shore, robbing the beach of sand that's needed to replace what's lost in storms and from the tides.

"We've got to work together and support the most important things that need to be done," Osterman said.

While work is already under way, the strategy isn't entirely complete.

There is uncertainty about how global warming will affect salmon survival. Summers are expected to get hotter and winter snowpacks that feed many Northwest streams are expected to be smaller and melt sooner. That means there will be less water in the streams when they're already at their warmest temperatures and lowest levels -- dangerous conditions for cold-blooded fish.

The plan hasn't answered key questions about how clean the water needs to be and how much water needs to flow through the rivers.

"Until those gaps are filled with actions that are going to provide the healthy rivers and healthy marine environment, we're not going to reach our goals," said Rob Masonis, Northwest regional director for the environmental group American Rivers. "That needs to be addressed immediately."

TO LEARN MORE

Puget Sound Chinook Endangered Species Act recovery plan: www.nwr.noaa.gov

Shared Strategy for Puget Sound: shredsalmstrategy.org

TARGETED RESULTS

For the first three years:

- 55 miles of rivers and tributaries improved
- 4,000 acres of estuary habitat restored
- 4,500 acres of habitat protected via acquisition
- 2,500 acres of streamside habitat restored
- 10 miles of rivers and streams improved and fish passage provided

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