

Coalition backs salmon plan

Group agrees to deliver recovery proposal in June

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THE OLYMPIAN

TACOMA -- Community leaders from across Puget Sound pledged Thursday to deliver a salmon recovery plan to federal authorities by June.

They acknowledged that many questions remain about how to fund it, how to govern salmon recovery and what the right mix of landowner regulations and incentives should be.

But a coalition of federal, state, local and tribal government officials, joined by farmers, environmentalists, builders and scientists, said they are in it for the long haul.

One of the plan's goals would be to make significant progress in the next 10 years to restore healthy, harvestable numbers of Puget Sound chinook in the region's 14 watersheds. "I think they are on the right track," said South Sound farmer Fred Colvin, and he pointed to a plank in the recovery plan that calls on saving farmland, which, in Puget Sound, borders 20 percent of the salmon spawning habitat.

One idea considered at the summit was to create a special label for agricultural products that come from farmland managed in a way that is friendly to fish.

Some of the summit time was spent celebrating dozens of habitat restoration projects already completed since Puget Sound chinook and Hood Canal summer chum were listed in 1999 as threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Private forestland owners alone have opened up more than 450 miles of spawning habitat by repairing and replacing logging road culverts and other barriers, noted Bill Wilkerson, executive director of the Washington Forest Protection Association.

In South Sound, the Nisqually Tribe has converted 40 acres of pastureland to productive salt marsh used by salmon to rest and feed. Another 100 acres are slated for restoration this summer in the Nisqually Delta.

"The tribes are here on every watershed," noted Billy Frank Jr., chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission.

"Success is defined by involving the Indian tribes and that gives us hope."

Frank then issued a challenge to the summit participants, which numbered nearly 600.

"Do you have the energy to do this?" Frank asked. "I'm 73 years old. I have the energy."

Since 1999, Congress has committed about \$100 million a year to Pacific salmon recovery, a piece of which has helped support the \$65 million per year effort in Puget Sound, noted U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Wash.

Some fellow congressional members are starting to experience salmon fatigue, he said.

"I'm starting to hear from colleagues: How much longer is this going to go on?" he warned.

"We've got to continue to show people that we're doing something and we need to connect Puget Sound salmon recovery to healing Puget Sound water quality."

Population growth, global warming and a pending change in ocean conditions that can lead to fewer salmon surviving, all point to the need for quick action, said state Department of Fish and Wildlife Director Jeff Koenings.

"I have a sense of urgency," he said.

"Mother Nature is on our side right now with favorable ocean conditions. But that could change in the next 10 years."

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries regional administrator director Bill Lohn said his agency supports the Shared Strategy bid to build a community-based salmon recovery plan, and is working with the watershed groups.

But it's too early to tell whether the plan will be strong enough and implemented adequately to trigger de-listing of Puget Sound chinook, he said.

"Not all of the pieces have come together yet, but I'm optimistic," Lohn said.

Some of the Puget Sound tribes still have reservations about the recovery plan, fearful that it could erode their authority as co-managers of the salmon, said Jim Peters, natural resources director for the Squaxin Island Tribe.

"The co-managers (tribes and state) are ultimately responsible for salmon recovery," he said.

Some environmentalists at the summit expressed concerns that the recovery plan will rely too much on voluntarism at the expense of stronger land-use laws.

At the same time, Kitsap County resident Vivian Henderson said, the recovery plan runs the risk of running afoul of landowners if they are asked to sacrifice too much habitat for salmon.

"Salmon are very important in our lives, but so are our private property rights," she said.

The specter of Puget Sound chinook fading into extinction sparked numerous pledges by governmental officials and citizens to keep working on the salmon's behalf.

"Our legacy should be to not let any species expire on our watch," said King County Executive Ron Sims.

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What's Next

A 10-year plan for protecting imperiled Puget Sound chinook salmon is in the works. A draft is expected to be completed by April with a final plan submitted in June to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

If accepted, it will mark the first locally developed recovery plan for endangered or threatened species ever crafted in the country.



Tasia Jungbauer leads a group of her Mill Pond Intermediate School classmates to the banks of the Nisqually River to toss in a salmon carcass while participating in the Nisqually River Education Project. Nisqually Stream Stewards will offer an opportunity for the general public to do the same during a salmon carcass tossing at 10 a.m. Saturday in Eatonville. Those interested should call Florian Leischner at 360-438-8687. The groups are among those working on a plan to protect endangered salmon. Steve Bloom/The Olympian

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