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Editorial

The trek for salmon

A five-year trek by hundreds of volunteers working to restore healthy chinook salmon runs in Puget Sound was celebrated in Tacoma last week.

Organized under the nonprofit banner of Shared Strategy, the regional volunteers are on a path whose only initial reward is moving on to ever-steep, rockier terrain: turning plans into action. By June, they will submit recommendations for their local watersheds to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the first-ever bottoms-up approach for salmon restoration.

The region, which has been on federal notice since 1999 to deal with endangered salmon, has taken the lead to involve all levels of government, scientists, tribes, farmers, environmentalists and business — including maritime, fishing, timber and development interests.

Taking steps to save the iconic salmon gets very specific. In Skagit County, there is tension between tribes and farmers over dikes maintained for farmland west of Interstate 5. The greatest hope for salmon is in these estuarine waters. Six months out from the deadline, the plan is still a work in progress.

Elsewhere around the Sound, the debates will be over bulkheads that give communities and homeowners their beachfront and buffer zones between streams and farmland and timber holdings.

Work has been nudged along by William Ruckelshaus, who led the Environmental Protection Agency for two presidents, and Jim Kramer, executive director of Shared Strategy. Groups have shaped plans in 14 watersheds and a 15th category for near-shore land throughout the Sound.

As this phase draws to a close, significant responsibility falls on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to recognize its role in a collaborative process. The agency cannot, as Ruckels-haus has noted, say "you tell us what you want to do, and we'll decide if you can do it."

Restoring endangered salmon runs is grounded in the environmental health of Puget Sound. Parallel work has looked at the health of the Sound, and the news is decidedly mixed. Help the Sound, and the salmon benefit as well.

Early estimates of paying for salmon-recovery plans are staggering and discouraging. They also fail to include the millions already being spent. There is a price tag to be sure, but working smarter, changing behaviors, halting the continued degradation of salmon habitat and reallocation of existing funds take a big bite out of the cost.

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