

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Creative plan aims to save chinook salmon

By Warren Cornwall

Seattle Times staff reporter

What will it take to save Puget Sound's beloved chinook salmon?

About \$1.5 billion in the first 10 years, tinkering with various rivers and estuaries, retooling hatcheries and dams, and a lot of scientific research.

And figuring out how to fit in more than a million additional residents without pushing the fish over the brink.

At least, that's according to a plan sent to the federal government last night from a coalition of regional policy-makers and interest groups who have spent three years drawing up a way to rescue the region's chinook from extinction.

It's described as an innovative approach that has built new political alliances needed for such an expensive and ambitious plan. But even the plan's authors acknowledge there are serious gaps, and that going from paper to reality will be a leap.

"The plan is on very solid ground," said Jim Kramer, executive director of Shared Strategy for Puget Sound, the nonprofit group that has led the work. "Now the question is will we make the commitment to implement it?"

The proposal, if accepted by the federal government, would become the official road map for chinook recovery in an area from the Canadian border to the flanks of Mount Rainier in the south, and from the Cascade Mountains west to Neah Bay.

Federal regulators have given encouraging signs that they will accept the plan. The National Marine Fisheries Service expects to review it, add some of its own provisions, and then release it for public review and comments in September.

The chinook that swim into Puget Sound have dwindled from 390,000 or more in the past to little more than 30,000 wild fish today, according to the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. That has prompted their listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The plan submitted yesterday calls for growing salmon populations to as much as 270,000 fish over the next half century. To do that, some salmon runs would have to increase tenfold.

"I'm sure it will be a big challenge," said Mike Grayum, executive director of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission, which represents tribes on fisheries issues.

"I think it will be a big challenge to get the money. I think it will be a big challenge both to make the hard decisions to implement the plan, and people changing their lifestyles."

The salmon's plight presents a major dilemma: how to revive a species that ranges through vast amounts of habitat, much of it in urbanized areas.

Farming, development, fishing, logging, power production and flood control have all contributed to the fish's decline, scientists say. Meandering rivers have been diked, and former estuaries and marshes are now farmland, subdivisions and shipping terminals. Dams block spawning grounds, and silt and pollution wash from former forest land.

Returning the fish to self-sustaining levels would take changes on all those fronts, according to the plan. Steps range from reconstructing estuaries to restoring logjams in rivers.

Unlike some recovery plans crafted by federal agencies, this one is composed of many largely separate plans, crafted by people within 14 watersheds.

Proponents said they hope the local origins will give them more political traction when it comes time to implement the steps. The plan, if accepted, wouldn't have legal authority to force many of the changes it calls for. So local support is critical to moving forward, Kramer said.

"If we actually have grass-roots support to do something, something might actually get done," Kramer said.

Spending on salmon recovery would need to more than double, according to the recommendations, from \$60 million a year now to as much as \$150 million a year. Backers say it's possible to increase spending to \$120 million a year without new taxes by tapping existing federal, state and local money, as well as impact fees paid to offset new development.

The effort has drawn support from local governments, farmers, tribes, environmentalists and developers. Many yesterday expressed encouragement at the plan's direction, but withheld final judgment until they reviewed all the details.

"I definitely think the Shared Strategy process did a good job of bringing people together and building a plan from the ground up," said Allison Butcher, spokeswoman for the

Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties, which represents development interests.

While the plan isn't perfect, that could be an advantage, said Tom Geiger, spokesman for the Washington Environmental Council (WEC).

"WEC isn't really looking for the best plan in the world that's going to sit on a shelf somewhere, but a decent plan that's going to get implemented," he said. "And it seems to us that's the direction that this is taking."

Acceptance of the plan at the local level varies significantly.

On the Snohomish River, it has won broad support, with endorsements from the Republican-controlled Snohomish County Council and the Democratic-controlled Metropolitan King County Council.

But on the Skagit River, agricultural representatives only met with the plan's authors this week for a face-to-face meeting to discuss it.

Scientists who reviewed the plan caution that there are still many unknowns.

For example, the plan doesn't account for changes that could come from climate change. It doesn't address water supply for rivers. And it doesn't tackle the adequacy of land-use regulations.

Warren Cornwall: 206-464-2311 or wcornwall@seattletimes.com