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Guest columnist

Helping salmon recover, one habitat at a time

By **William D. Ruckelshaus**

Special to The Times

All hell broke loose when a one-page summary of NOAA-Fisheries' new hatchery policy was leaked to the press last month. In response to court rulings, NOAA is reconsidering the status of salmon in 27 Northwest areas where they are listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This includes Puget Sound. The agency is also developing a new policy on how hatchery-origin fish should be considered — recommendations will be published in the Federal Register later this month.

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Hatchery-origin fish spend most of their lives in rivers, estuaries and oceans, and like their wild cousins need healthy habitat. It is important to use the best science to manage the complex interaction between hatchery-origin and wild fish and their environment.

Congress mandated a new blueprint for salmon hatchery reform in the Pacific Northwest, and an independent science panel recently released its recommendations. The report is now available to guide the management of federal, tribal and state hatcheries in Washington. The governments are committed to implementing these necessary hatchery reforms.

Most people in Puget Sound and other parts of the state are committed to protect and restore the land and waters that define our quality of life and benefit salmon, one of our regional totems and indicators of environmental health.

Fortunately, leaders in the region created an initiative — the Shared Strategy for Puget Sound — to build on efforts in local communities. Across the 14 major river basins that drain into Puget Sound, hundreds of people have worked for years on plans and actions to protect and restore salmon runs.

It's a tremendous, collaborative effort involving federal, state, local and tribal government officials, farmers, forestry, environmental, community and business leaders. Their

common goal: to take actions that support self-sustaining salmon runs at levels that allow us to enjoy and use this precious resource in concert with our region's prosperity.

Hundreds of big and small actions must be taken over a long period by many different government institutions and individuals. Great progress is being made:

- On the Skagit River, the removal of two main dikes on state land reconnected the mainstem and six tributary channels, restored 200 acres of estuary habitat and is expected to produce an additional 1,000 to 2,000 adult chinook.
- In the Nisqually River basin, 68 percent of core mainstem habitat is in protected status, with more planned.
- In the Green-Duwamish River that drains through Seattle to Elliott Bay, actions have been taken and more are planned to protect good habitat upstream of Auburn, and to make the Duwamish waters cleaner for the salmon's passage to the ocean.
- In Bellingham, the city, tribes and state are getting ready to remove a dam on the Nooksack River that is estimated to increase salmon runs by 30 percent.

From Bellingham to Olympia to Sequim, scientists and planners are working together with local officials and citizens on salmon-recovery plans. It's an inspiring example of grass-roots accomplishment. Instead of federal or state officials issuing salmon recovery edicts, community leaders are drafting their own plans to care for their lands, rivers, streams and shorelines.

Beginning this summer, the separate plans for each local watershed will come together as part of an overall salmon-recovery plan for Puget Sound. The comprehensive plan due in June 2005 will set regional priorities and ensure that independent efforts are well-coordinated.

It is vitally important that the Puget Sound salmon-recovery work continue. Either we the people do it, or the courts will take over and the inevitable piecemeal approach will benefit neither salmon nor people.

The Endangered Species Act is not going away. Puget Sound salmon are still in trouble — in good years the number of king salmon are rarely 10 percent of their historic abundance and in bad years they drop down to dangerously low levels. For fish to get out of trouble, they need naturally spawning populations and functioning habitat.

The controversy over NOAA's hatchery policy is about counting hatchery-origin and wild fish together. Hatcheries are an important part of salmon recovery for Puget Sound, but let's not lose sight of the bigger picture. The region's solution will include hatchery-origin fish, but it needs to preserve the genetic integrity and productivity of the wild fish. Similarly, our solution must allow for people and salmon to co-exist.

We in Puget Sound are well on the way to making the commitments necessary to help the fish recover. We have found that both salmon and people benefit from improving the places we both share. The regional agreement, a shared strategy, is crucial to present a unified effort to the Legislature and the Congress for the actions and funding needed to implement the plan.

We are on the cusp of a great initiative that will provide a legacy for generations of people and salmon to come. It's way too early to declare victory. We must press on.

William D. Ruckelshaus is chairman of the Salmon Recovery Funding Board and one of the founders of the Shared Strategy for Puget Sound. He twice has been administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

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