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NOAA's Fisheries Service Issues Recovery Plan for Mid-Columbia Steelhead

NOAA's Fisheries Service today released its recovery plan for Middle Columbia River steelhead, a fish that was first given protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1999.

The recovery plan calls for protecting existing high-quality steelhead habitat, managing agriculture and timber harvest to improve watersheds, and reforming hatcheries to prevent hatchery fish from competing with wild fish. The plan also provides specific actions to reduce predation by birds, marine mammals and non-native fish on steelhead migrating to and from the ocean. Efforts to reintroduce steelhead into the Upper Deschutes, White Salmon and Crooked rivers are also underway.

Today's release marks the fifth salmon recovery plan issued by NOAA's Fisheries Service, bringing to 10 the number of ESA-protected salmon or steelhead runs that now are covered by recovery plans. These populations range from sockeye salmon occupying northwest Washington's Lake Ozette to today's Mid-Columbia steelhead, which spawn in streams draining over 35,000 square miles of central Washington and Oregon and populate such Northwest rivers as the Walla Walla, Yakima, John Day, Deschutes and Klickitat.

A recovery plan, which is required under the ESA, lays out a roadmap for people and various public and private entities working to improve conditions for a listed species. It is very different from a biological opinion, which regulates specific federal activities. The goal of all recovery plans is to bring about naturally self-sustaining fish populations that no longer need federal protection under the ESA.

Today's plan is the product of a collaboration begun by NOAA with the Middle Columbia Recovery Forum, a group of over 20 federal, tribal, state and local entities that provided guidance on the plan.

"These diverse local groups, all of which have a passionate interest in seeing that these steelhead once again thrive, have produced a recovery plan that's scientifically sound and highly workable," said Barry Thom, NOAA's Fisheries Service acting northwest regional administrator. "This plan is the central organizing tool for taking action to benefit the fish in the basin and we're ready to get to work with our partners."

NOAA estimates it could take 25 to 50 years, if all the plan's actions are implemented, to recover Mid-Columbia steelhead, at a cost of approximately \$235 million for the first five years and \$996 million for all actions currently planned. The recovery of these fish and their habitat will provide economic and cultural benefits to people within and outside the Columbia basin for generations to come.

“It’s important to take action now, particularly in the face of emerging threats such as climate change and variable ocean conditions,” added Thom.

Although this plan, like all recovery plans, is voluntary, landowners can benefit from taking actions the plan calls for because they may be eligible for various federal and state incentive programs for land conservation. Furthermore, having an approved recovery plan in place may help local groups get state or federal funding for their recovery actions.

Today’s plan is part of a larger commitment made by NOAA’s Fisheries Service to develop ecosystem-based salmon recovery plans throughout the region. Elements of more than 60 sub-basin and watershed plans from across the Northwest are being incorporated into larger regional recovery plans for salmon and steelhead in the Columbia basin, the Snake River basin, the Oregon coast and Puget Sound.

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