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NOAA's Fisheries Service Proposes Listing Pacific Smelt as Threatened Species
Little Fish Was Once Abundant from California to British Columbia

NOAA's Fisheries Service said today it is proposing to list Pacific smelt as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Final action on the proposal could come as soon as a year from now.

Pacific smelt, known officially as eulachon and sometimes called candlefish or Columbia River smelt, are small ocean-going fish that historically ranged from northern California to the Bering Sea in Alaska. They return to rivers to spawn in late winter and early spring. Recreational fishers catch smelt in dip nets, and typically fry and eat them whole.

Smelt are a culturally significant species to native tribes, traditionally representing a seasonally important food source and a valuable trade item. Columbia River smelt were first described by Meriwether Lewis in 1806 during the Corps of Discovery; he lauded the fatty fish for their excellent taste.

A team of biologists from NOAA's Fisheries Service and two other federal agencies concluded that there are at least two Pacific smelt distinct population segments on the West Coast. The one at issue extends from the Mad River in Northern California north into British Columbia. Should these fish eventually be listed for federal protection, prohibitions against harming them would apply only to Pacific smelt in U.S. waters or to U.S. citizens on the high seas, even though the population extends into Canada.

The Cowlitz Indian tribe in Washington petitioned NOAA's Fisheries Service in 2007 to list the fish populations in Washington, Oregon and California. The tribe's petition described severe declines in smelt runs along the entire Pacific Coast, with possible local extinctions in California and Oregon.

The agency's scientific review found that this smelt stock is declining throughout its range. Further declines are expected as climate change affects the timing of spring flows in Northwest rivers. Those flows are critical to successful Pacific smelt spawning. Additionally, the agency's review concluded that Pacific smelt are particularly vulnerable to being caught in shrimp fisheries in the United States and Canada, since the areas occupied by shrimp and smelt often overlap.

The agency said other threats to the fish include water flow in the Klamath and Columbia river basins and bird, seal and sea lion predation, especially in Canadian streams and rivers.

The agency will take public comment on the proposal, and gather further scientific information on the species, the reasons for its decline and possible efforts to restore its numbers.

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