

State Addresses Coastal Coho Recovery

The protection and recovery efforts for Oregon coastal coho (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) have been highly politicized over the past few years. The coho were ESA listed as threatened in 1998 due to decades of decline in native runs. In 2001, a court decision in Eugene concluded that the ESA listing was “unlawful” and remanded the National Marine Fisheries Service to review the scientific basis that prompted the listing. The basis of this court decision was that hatchery fish abundance was not considered in the original data used to list Oregon coastal coho. The judge interpreted the vague federal descriptions of evolutionary significant units (ESUs) to include both naturally spawning and hatchery fish. As a result of the 2001 ruling and a decision by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), the Oregon coastal coho were delisted in January of this year. Fortunately, citizens, conservationists, tribes, commercial fishers, forest and agricultural groups, and bureaucrats recognize that a comprehensive strategy is needed to help preserve and restore wild coastal coho. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), along with other state agencies, has drafted the Oregon Coast Coho Conservation Plan. ODFW is taking public comment on the plan through November 17, 2006. Of course, there are major stakeholders who have differing opinions on how recovery efforts should proceed and whether the Plan goes too far or does not go far enough to help save these fish. The Plan is not designed to address all the recovery actions that would be necessary if the coho were still ESA listed. Rather, it strives to address “actions needed that achieve a socially established desired status goal that could be described as one scenario of broad sense recovery.”¹ The Plan is designed to allow coastal coho to remain sustainable and productive at levels that provide ecological, cultural, and economic benefits to Oregonians.

Here are some of the past and present issues. The number and diversity of coho ESUs has declined dramatically since the 1950s. Escapement goals for coho spawners have fallen short of state goals for at least 20 years. Scientific study of the coastal coho was limited until the 1990s. Thus, our understanding of historic ranges, abundance, and the direct effects of humans activity on coho survival are incomplete. Yet fish managers and scientists agree that the typical problems are to blame – lack of suitable habitat, barriers to upstream migration, low river flows, excessive harvest, influences of hatchery fish, and ocean conditions. The new Plan attempts to address habitat issues primarily by encouraging voluntary activities while avoiding increased regulations or restrictions. It relies on further support of existing and future partnerships between private landowners and the government to improve water quality, flow levels, and increase suitable habitat for coho. Hatchery reform will include a 65% reduction in coho hatchery releases. Detailed stream restoration goals are also spelled out in the Plan. Outcome measures include abundance, geographic distribution, productivity, persistence, diversity, and habitat. Goals are admirable – a doubling of suitable coho habitat and a doubling of returning spawners compared to 1993-1996 numbers. The state will perform a formal analysis and report on the Plan’s effectiveness in 6 years. However, ODFW projects that it will take 50 years to achieve the “desired status.” Fish conservation groups are concerned that the emphasis on voluntary improvements will not be enough to save wild coho populations. They also fault the Plan for failing to describe how outcomes will be reliably measured. Instead, they are advocating mandatory protection, enforcement of

land use and water quality regulations, and guaranteed funding for the Plan. It is true that habitat and water quality projects have often suffered from of fiscal cutbacks and diversions. In addition, hatcheries have traditionally enjoyed a larger piece of the pie than habitat projects. The issue is complex and deserves your close study. Go to http://www.oregon-plan.org/OPSW/cohoproject/coho_proj.shtml. We strongly suggest you carefully review the plan for yourself and submit your comments to Governor Kulongoski and ODFW. The coho need more advocates!

Keith & Lisa Hansen

¹ ODFW. State of Oregon Conservation Plan for the Oregon Coast Coho Evolutionarily Significant Unit. October 6, 2006.