

INTRODUCTION TO RULES PROPOSED TO ESTABLISH A SERIES OF WILD SALMONID MANAGEMENT AREAS IN WASHINGTON STATE

In its publication *Factors for Decline: A Supplement to the Notice of Determination for West Coast Steelhead Under the Endangered Species Act (1996)*, the National Marine Fisheries Service performed a comprehensive review of the status of steelhead on the West Coast of the US. This report considers in detail the factors contributing to the decline of steelhead in 15 distinct steelhead populations (ESU's), 6 of which are, in whole or in part, in Washington State.

In its summary of Factors Affecting Each Steelhead ESU, the first item listed was Hatchery Introgression in Olympic Peninsula, SW Washington and Lower Columbia River ESU's, and Hatchery Introgression was the number two factor (next to Habitat) in Puget Sound.

In April 2004, the Hatchery Scientific Review Group (HSRG) issued a groundbreaking report, *Hatchery Reform: Principles and Recommendations*, outlining its findings after an extensive review of hatchery policies and practices in Washington State, including federal, state and tribal programs, and making detailed recommendations for improvements.

In the summary of the report, the HSRG states that it "believes that the widespread stocking and outplanting of steelhead smolts poses unacceptable ecological and genetic risks to naturally spawning populations, particularly in small streams that receive such outplants or to which hatchery-origin fish stray. The biggest concern is the genetic risk posed by the spawning overlap between the hatchery (Chambers Creek origin), early-timed winter run stock and the native, late-timed winter run stock." (This report does not acknowledge the dangers to the remnants of the early-timed wild winter stocks.)

Perhaps its most important recommendation, and certainly its most comprehensive from a policy point of view, is to establish "Wild Steelhead Management Zones" The report recommends "that the managers develop a system of 'wild steelhead management zones' where entire sub-regions or portions of watersheds for large rivers are not planted with hatchery-origin fish but are managed for 'wild' steelhead only."

The HSRG goes on to recommend that wild steelhead management zones be developed for each of ten regions it outlines within Puget Sound and coastal Washington. It notes that harvest for steelhead may be compatible with this approach, but no hatchery-propagated steelhead would be introduced in such "zones." The report suggests that the streams selected should represent a balance of large and small streams, habitat types, stock status, etc.

In May 2007, a more comprehensive proposal – to establish a series of Wild Salmonid Management Areas (WSMA) - was presented to and adopted by the WDFW Steelhead/Cutthroat Policy Advisory Group, individuals appointed by the WDFW to provide policy and practical advice to the Director on this subject. This proposal built upon the HSRG recommendations in this regard, and further proposed that the protection of diverse steelhead life histories is also crucial to the long term health of the species.

The goal of the WSMA's is to insure the maintenance and recovery of wild salmonid populations to the abundance, diversity, productivity and distribution one would associate with diverse fish populations fully utilizing the habitat available to them. No hatchery fish of any nature would be released in such "areas" and the release of all wild fish would generally be required. Recreational fishing could be allowed, but should be restrictive enough to insure that the needs of wild fish are being met.

In February 2008, the Washington State Department of Fish & Wildlife proposed a *Statewide Steelhead Management Plan: Statewide Policies, Strategies and Actions (SSMP)* and this plan was subsequently adopted by the WDFW Commission in May 2008 for implementation. The first policy of the Plan – **Natural Production** – states that "steelhead management shall place the highest priority on the protection of wild steelhead stocks to maintain and restore stocks to healthy levels."

As such, the Department then adopted a strategy to establish a network of wild stock gene banks (WDFW terminology) where wild stocks are largely protected from the effects of hatchery programs.

The establishment of several Wild Salmonid Management Areas, as described in the proposal adopted by the SCPAG and recommended to the WDFW, is the intention of the following rules proposed. It has taken us thirteen years of study and discussion to get from the NMFS report to this point and in the interim very little meaningful action has been undertaken. Now is the time to move forward with these progressive proposals.

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