

PRESS RELEASE

Salmon Spawning & Recovery Alliance, Washington Trout,
Native Fish Society, & Clark-Skamania Flyfishers;

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Conservation Groups to Sue Feds over Puget Sound Salmon Harvest

The current fishing-management plan for Puget Sound is jeopardizing the recovery of chinook salmon, listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act. Some fishery standards appear to undermine the objectives of the Puget Sound Chinook Recovery Plan, nearly complete after years of effort. So say regional salmon-recovery advocates in a letter notifying the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the groups' intent to sue the agencies under the ESA.

The Salmon Spawning & Recovery Alliance, Washington Trout, the Native Fish Society, and the Clark-Skamania Flyfishers are asking NOAA Fisheries and USFWS to reinitiate ESA-consultation on the *Puget Sound Comprehensive Chinook Management Plan: Harvest Management Component*, a Resource Management Plan, or RMP, co-developed by the state and tribes for fisheries affecting Puget Sound chinook, and for NOAA Fisheries to reconsider its authorization of the RMP under the Puget Sound 4(d) Rule. They say the Agencies' Biological Opinion authorizing the RMP violated the ESA.

"Harvest rates on chinook from key Puget Sound rivers are too high for the salmon to recover," said Gary Loomis, President of the Salmon Spawning & Recovery Alliance. "NOAA Fisheries acknowledges as much, but approved the harvest plan anyway."

In Puget Sound NOAA Fisheries has authorized the direct harvest of some listed chinook, and "incidental-take" levels up to 76% on individual chinook populations. The conservation groups say the ESA does not allow the direct harvest of listed animals, the "incidental-take" levels on some key chinook populations are unsustainably high, and that NOAA Fisheries failed to consider or impose changes in fishing practices, locations, seasons, gear, and/or methods as reasonable and prudent alternatives.

"Fishery managers are responsible for salmon recovery," said Bill Bakke of the Native Fish Society, "and that means harvest management must deliver enough spawners to the rivers to maintain viable wild, native populations."

Harvest-impact levels and spawning targets in the fishery plan appear directly contrary to the recovery goals and habitat-improvement objectives in the Puget Sound Chinook Recovery Plan, developed by the Shared

Strategy group. Since 2002, local, tribal, state, and federal agencies have been working cooperatively to develop the Shared Strategy recovery plan.

The recovery standards and habitat objectives in Shared Strategy were developed by NOAA Fisheries' own Puget Sound Technical Recovery Team. But the viable-population thresholds authorized by NOAA in the fishery plan are less than ten percent of the abundance goals identified by the Puget Sound TRT and incorporated into the Draft Puget Sound Recovery Plan, recently submitted to NOAA by Shared Strategy. Some jurisdictions involved in Shared Strategy, and other interests that could be affected by the recovery plan, have expressed concern over contradictions between the two plans.

“Spawning goals and harvest rates should be consistent with ESA recovery goals,” said Kurt Beardslee, Executive Director of Washington Trout. “Harvest managers must assure that optimum numbers of wild salmon actually do return to spawn.”

In their notice-letter, the conservation groups note that Treaty responsibilities and other regulations offer strong protection for Tribal fishing rights, placing limits on NOAA Fisheries' legal ability to restrict Tribal fishing. The conservation groups say they respect and acknowledge Tribal rights to fish for salmon, but that impacts to listed fish can be reduced while still honoring treaties.

“We don't see any necessary conflict between treaty fishing rights and reducing the impact of harvest,” said Beardslee. “While you might consider voluntary, incentive-based changes in tribal fishing gear or methods, less intensive, more selective non-Tribal fisheries would reduce impacts significantly while potentially creating more opportunity to harvest hatchery stocks and other healthier species.”

Salmon harvest has been reduced from historic levels by 30% to 50%, depending on the run – but the starting point was very high, typically 60% to 90% of returning populations. Under the current plan, allowable harvest impacts on listed chinook in Puget Sound vary from 22% to 76% for different populations. Habitat improvements in Puget Sound are expected to cost \$150 million a year for at least ten years, and may extend out 50 years. Many scientists inside and outside the federal agencies believe that chinook recovery will also require consistently achieving spawning levels of wild salmon high enough to conserve as much of the genetic, geographic, and life-history diversity within and between salmon populations as possible. That will likely require much lower total fishing impacts than current management allows.

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Note: for copies of notice letter to NOAA Fisheries and USFWS, contact Ramon Vanden Brulle at Washington Trout; 425/788-1167; ramon@washingtontrout.org.