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Federal Endangered Species Act Listing for Two West Coast Steelhead Populations; California, Oregon Plans Will Protect Three Others

The Commerce Department's National Marine Fisheries Service is placing two populations of West Coast steelhead trout—one in California and one straddling the Washington-Oregon border—on the Endangered Species List. Three other populations of the fish—along the Oregon coast, the northern California coast and in the famous Klamath Mountains Province of Oregon and California—will be protected by special conservation plans being designed in close coordination with California and Oregon state officials.

In Oregon, steelhead are getting much-needed help from an expanded state-federal partnership that combines species protection and state control. The state is expected to provide properly functioning aquatic habitat for the long-term survival of salmon and steelhead in Oregon.

“This promises to be a new age for the Endangered Species Act,” said Terry Garcia, the Commerce Department's assistant secretary for oceans and atmosphere. “We are today combining regional natural resource expertise, federal responsibility for at-risk species and a serious sense of cooperation to protect one of America's most magnificent sport fish.”

“Today's decision confirms that the Endangered Species Act has remarkable flexibility to work with states to fashion tailor-made conservation strategies good for at-risk species and grounded on solid local and state commitments,” added Garcia. “Because of that flexibility, we are able to embrace two highly focused state conservation plans, forestalling a federal listing, and producing creative solutions to a regional problem,” Garcia said.

This is the third time the fisheries service has subscribed to a state plan in lieu of an Endangered Species Act listing. Last December, NOAA's fisheries service deferred a listing of Atlantic salmon and accepted a comprehensive conservation plan by the state of Maine. Last April, the agency accepted Oregon's conservation plan for coho salmon and refrained from listing that fish along the state's central and northern coast.

“Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber has shown the way in embracing a state-federal partnership for salmon,” Garcia said. “He has fought fiercely for salmon-saving reform and he has retained an important measure of state influence.”

“Make no mistake,” Garcia said. “Extinction is not an option. We are committed, irrevocably and unconditionally, to that principle. But we’re also committed to protecting and restoring steelhead and other salmon in the most efficient, least disruptive way possible. The responsibility for species conservation doesn’t exist solely with the federal government, the states can be part of the solution. It’s through these new and tailored partnerships that species recovery will occur.”

All factors in steelhead declines, the fisheries service said, have to be addressed. These include timber harvesting, farming, water diversions, hydropower operations, gravel mining, urbanization, recreational angling and certain hatchery practices.

“Whether protection comes from the federal Endangered Species Act or from a state conservation plan, or some combination of the two, the same general actions will be required to save steelhead,” said William Stelle, head of the fisheries service’s Northwest Region in Seattle.

“This is not just some administrative decision or bureaucratic process,” Stelle added. “This is a life-or-death struggle to save a legendary species of fish we are charged with protecting.”

In the Klamath Mountains Province, two state conservation plans will protect steelhead found from Oregon’s Elk River in the north to California’s Klamath River in the south. Habitat restoration is already underway on the extensive federal lands in the area, and new fishing regulations in both states are expected to help steelhead recovery.

In addition, fisheries service officials said, California is implementing a \$43 million habitat-restoration and watershed-planning project that will help conditions there. The state has also committed to a review of its forest practice rules, based on recommendations from the fisheries service.

Fisheries researchers report that steelhead in the Oregon Coast population group (from the Columbia River south to Cape Blanco) are stable or increasing in some rivers. The state has taken steps to reduce the harmful influence from hatchery fish on wild stocks of steelhead.

Federal and state biologists agree that the condition of steelhead in the lower Columbia River in Oregon and Washington (from the Hood and Wind rivers downstream to the Cowlitz River and below Willamette Falls), is critical. These fish will be protected as a threatened species by the Endangered Species Act.

Washington state this week approved a special supplemental budget that provides approximately \$35 million to initiate state-wide efforts to restore threatened salmon, steelhead and trout. Nearly \$1 million is earmarked for steelhead in the lower Columbia River. Washington expects to deliver a final draft of its plan to the fisheries service in early summer.

Federal action will provide the bulk of the protection for these steelhead until sufficient state and local conservation initiatives are in place.

In total, the fisheries service said, there are now seven steelhead populations protected under the federal Endangered Species Act and three by state conservation plans. In addition to the two groups it listed for federal protection today as “threatened,” the fisheries service last August listed as “endangered” steelhead in the Upper Columbia River and in Southern California. Listed as “threatened” last August were steelhead in the Snake River Basin, the central California coast and the south-central California coast. The fisheries service will soon publish a proposed rule designating critical habitat for steelhead.

Under the Endangered Species Act, a threatened species is likely to become endangered in the near future; an endangered species is likely to become extinct.

Supporting material, including maps and fact sheets, can be found on the National Marine Fisheries Service home page for its Northwest Region at www.nwr.noaa.gov.

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