



Contact: Lance Kruzic, 503-231-2178
Rob Jones, 503-230-5427
Brian Gorman, 206-526-6613

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Fisheries Service Approves "Innovative" Salmon Plan

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service has approved an innovative Oregon salmon plan. According to the Commerce Department agency and state officials, the plan will help recover Willamette Basin spring chinook, yet allow fishermen to catch a much higher number of hatchery-produced chinook than in the past.

The Fisheries Management and Evaluation Plan, developed by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, sets fishing regulations to help recover spring chinook salmon in the Willamette River Basin.

"Anglers will get more opportunities to catch fish, without getting in the way of salmon recovery," said Rob Jones, chief of the fisheries service's hatchery and inland fisheries branch in Portland.

Willamette chinook salmon are biologically distinct from chinook in nearby geographical areas. They are adapted to the Willamette Basin and have unique migration characteristics. Because they have declined to such low numbers, they are protected as "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Salmon-protection regulations – the so-called 4(d) rules required by the ESA – issued last year were based on a new policy that said traditional, one-size-fits-all regulations won't work for West Coast salmon because the fish are so dependent on local geographical situations. The new 4(d) rules provided guidance and opportunities for state and local jurisdictions to work with the fisheries service on innovative fishing, hatchery, and habitat initiatives and regulations tailored to local conditions. Oregon's fisheries plan thus becomes another program under the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds adopted by the federal 4(d) rule.

According to Jones, the plan incorporates the latest science and management technology to help rebuild badly depleted chinook runs throughout the Willamette Basin by taking advantage of the fact that since 1997 all Willamette Basin spring chinook produced in hatcheries have been marked by having an identifying fin removed. The clipped fin doesn't grow back and a returning adult can be easily identified. Those fish are now beginning to return as spawning adults.

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Fishermen will keep only marked fish from hatcheries. State and federal officials say that means anglers will catch about 75 percent fewer wild salmon than in previous years.

The plan requires annual evaluations by Oregon and the fisheries service, and can be refined if new information and analysis warrant it.

State and tribal officials are developing fishery management and evaluation plans in other Oregon locations and in Washington and Idaho.

A copy of the plan, and background information on it, are available at <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov>.

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