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Contact: Janet Sears
206-526-6172

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NOAA's Fisheries Service Issues Biological Opinion to Protect Willamette Basin Salmon and Steelhead

NOAA's Fisheries Service has issued guidelines and timetables for the three federal agencies involved in the management of 13 dams in northwestern Oregon's Willamette River Basin that will allow the dams to be operated and maintained without threatening the continued existence of winter steelhead and Chinook salmon, or harming their critical habitat.

The new guidance, known as a biological opinion, examines the effect of the operation of the dams on Willamette River tributaries and 42 miles of bank protection projects on 13 populations of salmon and steelhead protected by the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The biological opinion, which covers actions through 2023, strengthens the initial proposal from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to provide adequate protection for two ESA-listed species on the Willamette River—winter steelhead and Chinook salmon.

NOAA's Fisheries Service worked with the three agencies to strengthen their proposal with additional actions, including a schedule for completion of improvements to some of the dams so that juvenile fish can pass them safely, and improving water temperatures downstream from the dams to a more natural seasonal pattern.

The biological opinion meets the legal standard of assuring an "adequate potential for the species' recovery."

The fisheries agency said the biological opinion includes an important program of research and monitoring to ensure any improvements made to the dams to help fish, including changes to the measures as necessary, are scientifically based and are likely to succeed.

While today's biological opinion is not a salmon recovery plan, efforts to make the dams more fish-friendly, to improve river water temperatures, and to improve hatchery practices will measurably aid recovery efforts. Oregon is leading efforts to complete a formal salmon-recovery plan for the Willamette Basin.

The Willamette River is one of the Columbia River's largest tributaries and is its most densely populated river basin. It empties into the Columbia about 100 miles upstream from the Pacific Ocean. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers owns and operates the dams, primarily to reduce the risk of floods. Bonneville Power Administration transmits and markets the power generated from eight of the dams and the Bureau of Reclamation manages irrigation contracts for water stored behind the dams. The reservoirs behind many of the dams are used for recreation and fishing. In addition, the Corps is authorized to release water from the dams to serve water quality and fish-and-wildlife purposes downstream in the tributaries and the Willamette River.

Documents associated with this action are on the Web at
<http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Salmon-Hydropower/Willamette-Basin/Willamette-BO.cfm>.

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