



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
The Under Secretary of Commerce
for Oceans and Atmosphere
Washington, D.C. 20230

MAY 14 2004

Dear Member of Congress:

I am writing to inform you about the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) upcoming proposals to renew listings of Northwest salmon populations under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). to explain how hatcheries will be taken into account in the proposals, and to correct recent erroneous accounts of how our hatchery policy will be used.

At President Bush's direction, recovery of salmon is the major focus for NOAA in the Pacific Northwest, an objective widely shared in the region and the nation. We have been pleased to work with you and Congress to direct over \$100 million of NOAA's budget, and hundreds of millions more from other federal agencies to the cause of salmon recovery this year alone. These substantial resources are enabling the hard work of countless communities to improve hundreds of miles of fish habitat, to enhance fish passage to the habitat, and to rebuild fish stocks in order to re-establish sustainable natural salmon populations. Combined with favorable ocean conditions, this hard work is producing dramatic increases in nearly all of the salmon runs. Much work remains to be done to expand the habitat to support future generations of naturally spawning populations.

NOAA will shortly propose a renewed set of listings of salmon populations under ESA. Since 1991, the federal government has listed 26 species of salmon and steelhead in the Northwest and California for protection under ESA. In a lawsuit that followed these listings, a federal judge set aside the listing of Oregon Coast Coho salmon because NOAA failed to include closely-related hatchery fish in the listing decision. Since the same flaw was present in almost all of the other listing decisions, NOAA voluntarily agreed to reconsider all of our earlier listing decisions and to adjust our policy for considering hatchery fish in making those decisions – and NOAA will be asking the public to comment on both. NOAA's decisions are driven by the science, which suggests benefits, risks, and uncertainties regarding salmon hatcheries. Simply put, some well-managed conservation hatcheries are fostering recovery of species, some hatcheries are having little or no effect, and some hatcheries potentially hinder recovery.

After re-evaluating the listing of 26 species of salmon and steelhead, and considering the science on hatcheries, we have preliminarily determined to propose relisting at least 25 of the 26 species, with evaluation of the remaining species still underway. A final proposal will be completed in the next two weeks and the new hatchery policy will be only one factor for the evaluation still under way.



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THE ADMINISTRATOR



The central tenet of the hatchery policy is the conservation of naturally-spawning salmon and the ecosystems upon which they depend. As our preliminary conclusions indicate, appropriate consideration of hatchery fish does not lead to wholesale de-listing of species as some are claiming. Equally erroneous is the suggestion our policy would allow the purposes of ESA to be satisfied by having all the salmon in a hatchery. Salmon hatcheries have long played an important role in the Northwest, including fulfilling trust and treaty rights of Northwest Indian tribes, and supporting sport and commercial harvest cherished by Northwest citizens. NOAA is encouraged by improvements in hatchery management, and is seeing their increasing contribution to speeding the recovery of salmon.

The communities of the Northwest have set high standards for their stewardship of land and water and NOAA urges them to continue this important work. NOAA strongly applauds the inspiring collaborative efforts underway in communities across the Northwest states and is pleased to be one of the region's most committed partners.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "C. Lautenbacher Jr.", written in black ink.

Conrad C. Lautenbacher Jr.
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy (Ret.)
Under Secretary of Commerce for
Oceans and Atmosphere