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**NOAA NEARS COMPLETION OF DRAFT STRATEGY
TO PROTECT COLUMBIA/SNAKE SALMON AND STEELHEAD**
Performance-Based Plan Expected to Avoid Jeopardy to Listed Species

PORTLAND, OR – Noting improvement of virtually every Columbia and Snake River salmon and steelhead population over the past four years, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) announced the upcoming release of a draft written strategy to further protect Endangered Species Act-listed salmon. Nearly all ESA-listed populations are significantly improved from numbers counted in 2000, and well above the 10-year averages.

NOAA Fisheries credits measures to restore hundreds of miles of in-river and estuary salmon habitat, state-of-the-art technological upgrades to hydroelectric dams and other facilities, aggressive predator control, better hatchery and harvest practices, and favorable ocean conditions with boosting returns over the past four years. The Bush Administration has made available important federal resources to salmon recovery in these prioritized areas, including a request for \$100 million in the President’s FY 2005 budget for hundreds of collaborative, locally driven projects. The new strategy continues these successful efforts and calls for historic federal commitments to improve fish passage at hydroelectric dams. The plan balances the energy and water needs of the Northwest with the commitment to increasing healthy salmon stocks.

“Although the draft is undergoing final review, this draft biological opinion is expected to result in the most significant improvements in the federal dams since the Endangered Species Act was enacted over thirty years ago,” said Bob Lohn, the Northwest Regional Administrator for NOAA Fisheries. “This is a win-win scenario for salmon and for the citizens of the Northwest and we look forward to discussing the details of the plan in the coming days and how it will positively contribute to salmon for the long-term.”

Bonneville Power Administration, the U.S. Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation--three federal agencies that own and operate several major hydroelectric dams and other facilities that operate on the Columbia and Snake Rivers--proposed an aggressive set of salmon protection measures. The new strategy, in the form of a “biological opinion” responds to these measures and is designed to protect ESA-listed salmon populations from jeopardy.

As a result of the success of salmon protection and recovery efforts, NOAA Fisheries is expecting to be able to conclude that the proposed actions by federal agencies in the biological opinion are not likely to jeopardize ESA-listed fish – a significant achievement for both salmon and the Northwest citizens. The plan is also designed to focus on results – the federal agencies operating dams will measure the performance of their proposed operations and adjust efforts accordingly to ensure salmon protection and that salmon numbers continue to thrive.

The new draft plan is a requirement of the federal Endangered Species Act and governs how the basin's hydroelectric system must be operated to minimize harm to the thirteen populations of salmon that the federal environmental law protects. The draft document will also respond to an order by a federal district court in June 2003 that a prior version should be revised to provide more certainty for ESA-listed salmon. NOAA Fisheries worked collaboratively on the plan's scientific details with other federal agencies, the Northwest states and Indian tribes.

The actual draft of the biological opinion is near completion and undergoing final technical and legal review. It is expected to be released for public review within the next ten days. For more information, please go to www.salmonrecovery.gov.

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