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NOAA Fisheries Service Agrees to Review Petition to Protect Smelt
Agency Will Begin Review to Determine ESA Listing

NOAA Fisheries Service is formally accepting a petition from the Cowlitz Indian Tribe to list eulachon (smelt) populations in Washington, Oregon and California for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The tribe's petition describes severe declines in smelt runs along the entire Pacific Coast, with possible local extinctions in California and Oregon

Eulachon, also called smelt or sometimes candlefish, are small, ocean-going fish that historically ranged from northern California to the Bering Sea. They return to rivers to spawn in late winter-early spring. Recreational fishers catch smelt in dip nets, and typically fry and eat them whole.

Smelt are a culturally significant species to native tribes, traditionally representing a seasonally important food source and a valuable trade item. Columbia River smelt was first described by Meriwether Lewis in 1806 during the Corps of Discovery; he lauded the fatty fish for their excellent taste.

The petition seeks designation of smelt populations in United States rivers south of the Canadian border as a distinct population segment, a regulatory finding that allows the agency to consider a sub-group of the entire species as a candidate for listing under the ESA.

NOAA's Fisheries Service will assemble a team of experts to examine in detail the health of smelt populations along the coast and the causes for the apparent declines. This fall the agency could propose ESA protection for some or all of these smelt populations. A formal proposal would be followed by a year-long period of peer review, public comment and public hearings before any final decision about official ESA listing is made.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 70 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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