

OREGON COASTAL COHO SALMON CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT: A HISTORY OF FAILURE

By Bill Bakke



The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is responsible under state law to prevent the serious depletion of indigenous species. In a letter opinion in 1997, the Oregon Department of Justice re-confirmed this and said, “The Commission’s and Department’s overriding obligation is to manage to prevent serious depletion of any indigenous species, which thereby enables the Department and Commission to provide optimum recreational and aesthetic benefits.” (emphasis added) Therefore, conservation and preservation of wild salmonids is an undisputable principle that informs all programs, plans and projects that ODFW carries out. In doing so, ODFW provides the wise stewardship the public depends upon.

The 83 year decline in Oregon coastal coho salmon and the ESA-listings of most sea-run salmonids testifies to a very different reality. The following is a brief recounting of the agency’s coho planning programs culminating in the most recent federal court recommendation to list the coastal coho as a threatened species.

Effective salmonid management takes into account habitat protection and fish abundance, diversity, distribution and productivity. The ODFW has no legal authority over habitat; it can only advise land and water management agencies about those measures that would protect state waters for native fish. However, ODFW does have authority over hatchery production and harvest fisheries, both of which can contribute to the decline of wild native salmonids. In the following review I focus on ODFW’s planning and policy development to protect coastal coho salmon, pointing out problems that ODFW staff have recognized and to illustrate a deep seated institutional bias for utilization over conservation. To bring these dual purposes into balance will take leadership which the agency has not had for over 20 years. As Jack Ward Thomas once said a good agency “tells the truth and follows the law.”

1980

“An escapement goal of 200,000 adult coho is recommended.”

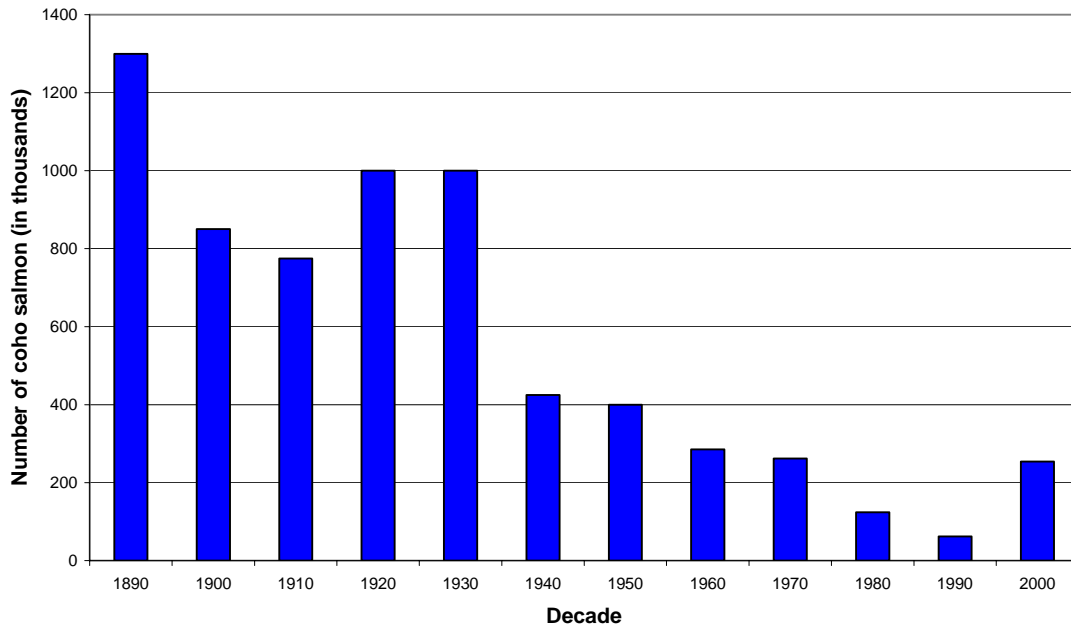
“Basin escapement goals should be based on 40 adults per mile of habitat (20 females per mile assuming a 1:1 sex ratio)...”

“Ultimately it will be necessary to establish an escapement goal for each river basin. These basin escapement goals will provide salmon managers with a reference framework to assess the distribution of the coast-wide escapement.”

“The stock-recruitment and the progeny-catch method indicates that the escapement for the coast should be about 200,000 adults, which would equate to a peak count of 20-25 adults on the standard ODFW index. The smolt production method indicates that we need a total (not peak) of about 20 females for each mile of spawning stream. This information greatly facilitates the evaluation of spawning escapement in individual streams or basins.”

Beidler, W.M., T.E. Nickelson, and A.M. McGie. 1980. Escapement Goals For Coho Salmon in Coastal Oregon Streams. Information Report Series, Fisheries, Number 80-10. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Average abundance of wild coho salmon along the Oregon Coast



Data sources: Oregon Coho Salmon Biological Status Assessment and Staff conclusion for listing under the Oregon ESA. Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, Feb. 22, 1995 and Pacific Fishery Management Council 2003. Preseason Report I Stock Abundance Analysis for 2003 Ocean Salmon Fisheries

1982

In 1982 the ODFW adopted its first species plan, the Coho Salmon Management Plan. Faced with declining coho salmon runs and fisheries, the agency was anxious to figure out what to do. An estimate of adult coho production from 1965 to 1976 was 2.5 million fish and it decreased to about 1.4 million from 1977-1980, a loss of about 1.1 million adults. “Wild coho production in Oregon coastal streams dropped from an average level of 677,000 adults during 1965-1976 to 433,000 during 1977-1980, a loss of 244,000 wild adults.”

The plan states that “the optimum spawning escapement (naturally reproducing spawners) is estimated to be about 200,000 wild coho salmon in coastal watersheds. An estimated 45,000 additional jacks will be produced bringing the total average annual escapement to about 245,000 fish. The total escapement goal is allocated among the individual watersheds...”

“Ocean harvest will be regulated to achieve the optimum annual escapement of wild spawners to the production areas, but not on the basis of an individual system.” The agency ignores the recommendation of its own biologists in 1980 to set stream specific spawner abundance goals and until management goals based on spawner abundance are adopted by watershed the agency will continue to stand in the way of salmon recovery. On harvest, they have adopted the theory of management by exploitation rate rather than spawner abundance, ignoring the reality that exploitation rate management provides fewer spawners at low run sizes than large ones. Protecting wild spawners at low numbers is essential to maintaining viable runs. These two factors show very clearly that ODFW’s management principle is based on harvest rather than conservation and the resulting pattern has been reduced productivity of salmon, endangered status, and closed fisheries.

After the conclusion of the 1982 coho planning effort Jim Lichatowich, assistant chief of fisheries, sent a memo to staff (1983) saying, “It is becoming clear to me that one of the most serious of the problems our agency faces is the inadequacy of our planning... We cannot ignore the mega-problems clearly outlined in our future. We must anticipate them and develop the policies which will guide our tactical and operational plans for the future.” He concluded “...not to respond to our planning shortfall is a short-sighted approach which will bear bitter fruit in the

future for not only our organization but more importantly for the resource and the public who depends on us to be wise stewards of that resource.”

ODFW. 1981. Comprehensive plan for production and management of Oregon’s anadromous salmon and trout. Part I General Considerations. Part II Coho Salmon Plan. Technical Draft.

ODFW. 1982. Comprehensive plan for production and management of Oregon’s anadromous salmon and trout. Part II coho salmon plan.



UNPROTECTED: The life cycle of an Oregon coastal coho

2007

The 1982 Coho Plan goal was for 200,000 wild spawners in Oregon coastal watersheds. From 1990-2004 the number ranged from 16,500 to 231,400 for an average wild spawner abundance of 74,800. Recognizing a problem, the ODFW designed a new Coho Salmon Plan adopted in 2007.

In this plan the ODFW amended the spawner abundance goal for wild coho from the 40 fish per mile (1982 Coho Plan) to a novel and untested level of just 5 coho per mile to maintain viable populations of wild naturally spawning coho salmon. Rather than a spawner abundance goal of 200,000 wild coho, the new ODFW plan proposes a 25,000 goal. The reasoning for this amendment was not stated, but the justification for it is that the wild coho did not go extinct at low run size therefore they cannot go extinct. This novel spawner abundance goal is the subject of considerable controversy and was not accepted by scientists representing the National Marine Fisheries Service Science Center nor the state panel of Independent Multidisciplinary Science Team. However, the NMFS agreed with the ODFW assessment and decided to not list the Oregon coastal coho salmon as a threatened species.

Conservation groups, including NFS, took NMFS to court for failure to list Oregon coastal coho as a federally protected species under the ESA. The NMFS decision to not protect the coho salmon was based on the ODFW assessment, so the court reviewed the ODFW coho plan and the NMFS decision, finding that “...the NMFS’s determination not to list the Oregon Coastal coho salmon is arbitrary, capricious, contrary to the best available science, and a violation of the ESA...NMFS should be ordered to issue a new final listing rule consistent with the ESA...”

Even though the public sought and got a favorable federal court decision, the fact remains that ODFW planning and policy fails to reverse the decline of wild coho salmon.

The public relies upon state government to protect common property resources such as salmonids. State law is clear that the purpose of the ODFW is to prevent the serious depletion of indigenous species, and, in fact it is the “overriding obligation” of the agency. In the last 83 years the pattern of decline has been set and the logical

outcome is the eventual extinction of wild native coho salmon and the public benefits they provide. To change this institutional pattern requires leadership and a strong commitment to conservation. The ODFW cannot do this task on its own. It requires the steadfast commitment from the Oregon Legislature and the Governor as well, for ODFW does not have authority over the land and water management agencies that control the health and productivity of salmonid habitat. In order for all responsible parties to take the necessary action, the public must insist that it be so. The salmon will tell us if we are being effective; right now they are making the unambiguous statement that we are failing.

