

NFS

NATIVE FISH SOCIETY

Conserving biological diversity of native fish and protecting their habitats

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COMMENTS ON THE DEIS FOR THE STATEWIDE STEELHEAD MANAGEMENT PLAN

Please accept my comments on the wild steelhead management DEIS and enter them into the record. I am confining my comments to management actions that the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife has authority over. These include fisheries management, hatchery management, monitoring and research, and compliance monitoring of agency authority and commitment, and funding to support wild steelhead recovery plans. While habitat issues are important and represent a limitation on the success of any wild salmonid recovery plan, the agency has only advisory privilege on habitat alteration. A comprehensive wild steelhead recovery plan is therefore only possible if the Governor decides to create one, for the WDFW is unable as a single agency to develop such a plan. A comprehensive plan for wild steelhead means that the WDFW provides the abundance and diversity of adult spawners while the land and water management agencies protect the habitat that will maintain and improve the productive capacity for each wild steelhead population by watershed in the state.

3.1.3 Fisheries Management

The statement is made that "...fishery managers must have knowledge of the abundance and timing of the stocks and the spatial structure of the populations in the available habitat so they can coordinate actions to support the VSP-based natural production strategies within the available habitat." (VSP objectives are to protect and maintain abundance, productivity, diversity and spatial structure)

This assumes more knowledge and data than exists and also assumes selection of Alternative 2. To accomplish the VSP strategy requires a strong research and monitoring program that is well funded, a strong compliance monitoring program, and a well funded management program. At this time it is beyond the capacity of the WDFW to successfully implement these strategies. The DEIS

should disclose a budget for each of these programs in order to fully disclose the commitment to support these strategies.

The DEIS says: "...harvest efforts are adjusted so they do not impact ESA listed species." This anticipates a fishery management philosophy where the purpose of management is to not jeopardize ESA-listed steelhead. While this is certainly an important purpose of fishery management, it is not the most useful for rebuilding depleted populations. Fishery management would be improved by adopting a policy to not impede recovery of ESA-listed fish and to manage for productivity of native, wild populations rather than just prevent extinction.

The DEIS states that fishery managers must set fishing seasons to be sure they "maximize the harvest of hatchery fish without over harvesting the wild stock." It points out the reasoning for this but does not disclose methods for accomplishing this task other than "maximizing harvest of hatchery fish." This assumes that hatchery releases will continue even if the magnitude is inappropriate for protection of native, wild steelhead in a stream. It does not discuss the use of barriers to hatchery fish migration to prevent natural reproduction or use of acclimation sites to isolate hatchery fish from wild fish. If the only tool the agency is willing to use to protect and rebuild wild, native steelhead is to maximize harvest of hatchery fish, the VSP strategy will fail and the wild steelhead will not be recovered.

The DEIS cautions the reader that "Fishery managers cannot manage a fishery solely for the benefit of wild steelhead when other ESA listed species inhabit the same space." I would be pleased if wild steelhead were provided the benefit of conservation management for a change. This statement makes the assumption that by managing for wild steelhead other depleted wild species could be harmed, but the interaction that would cause this harm is not disclosed. Steelhead, bull trout, and salmon have co-evolved in these watersheds and have life history traits that work to minimize interactions. Casting wild steelhead in the role of a limiting factor in the recovery of other salmonids and char has no scientific basis and indicates a policy bias the agency has for salmon. Wild steelhead are considered a management problem by the agency in its salmon harvest mission. It is more likely that chum salmon, for example, are harmed by releases of hatchery steelhead and coho salmon. Hatchery smolts are released at a time when chum fry are migrating to the ocean and the hatchery smolts are a large predator.

The DEIS says "managing fisheries to support natural production strategies within a comprehensive All-H context" is a commitment, however, the All-H approach has no verifiable success in recovery of natural production for steelhead, so it is unlikely that by continuing this commitment, management

success will be achieved. This points out an important issue that the EIS avoids, that is, wild steelhead recovery will take new measures and strategies to be successful. By assuming the existing models will actually function to recover wild steelhead (which has not happened), the DEIS is defeating its own premise, that wild steelhead will be recovered.

Alternatives:

The main difference between the descriptions of Alternative 1 and 2 is fisheries on wild stock. The alternatives do not provide an adequate explanation, so the difference may be arbitrary and designed to influence public selection of alternatives, driving them to select alternative 2, the preferred one by the agency.

Alternative 2 would allow “wild stock retention” where VSP goals are achieved. Alternative 1 would allow “no provision for fishing opportunity on stocks that meet VSP goals.” This distinction between the two alternatives is not explained. The DEIS says (Alternative 1) that there would be no fishing on stocks that meet VSP goals, because “protection goals are carrying capacity focused.” Yet in Alternative 2 meeting the same VSP goals there is no similar carrying capacity constraint. Unless this distinction can be explained in the DEIS, it must be considered an arbitrary device to discourage support for the alternative. It is unreasonable to forbid a live release fishery on wild steelhead as long as conservation goals are expected to be achieved. A strong monitoring program can switch fisheries on and off according to conservation requirement standards for each stock.

Alternative 1:

This alternative is no different than Alternative 2 except for the no fishing clause which the agency knows is unacceptable to the public most interested in this DEIS and the adoption of a state wide steelhead conservation plan. Reviewers must then ask why the agency wants to drive public comment toward Alternative 2, the preferred one?

Alternative 2:

This alternative allows 10% incidental harvest of depleted steelhead stocks and a kill fishery on steelhead populations that meet VSP goals. The agency is nervous about this alternative and worries about lost fishing opportunity and license sales.

This alternative makes a major assumption that VSP objectives can be defined with enough precision to recover each wild steelhead population to recover

them. Given the fact that there is a lack of data on VSP values per wild stock across the state by watershed, it is unclear how this alternative will be more successful in wild steelhead recovery than other alternatives. Until there is the funding commitment to describe the VSP objectives by wild stock per watershed and the funding to enforce regulations and to secure agency compliance in achieving those objectives, Alternative 2 is unlikely to be different in impact from Alternatives 3 and 4. In other words, the public interested in wild steelhead conservation may select Alternative 2 in the belief that it is meaningful and allows fishing, when in fact it is a status quo proposal.

Given the problems and issues stated above, it is a real concern for those that are interested in wild steelhead recovery and fisheries that this DEIS actually describes a management strategy that does not recover wild steelhead. In fact the public should be concerned that the actual result of the DEIS is the continuation of wild steelhead depletion and the ongoing pattern of extinction.

This problem can be overcome only by disclosing the funding commitment to make VSP based management work for wild steelhead recovery.

3.1.4 Artificial Production Alternatives:

Alternative 1:

This alternative has never been tried and should be tested to determine the value it may have for recovery of wild steelhead. To start, this alternative should be tested on a few watersheds in each steelhead DPS and evaluated.

The alternatives are structured to be one or the other which does not make sense for an EIS since a combined approach may be more viable as a recovery option.

Alternative 2:

This alternative makes assumptions that hatchery management can be used to recover wild steelhead populations without loss of reproductive fitness and impacts from competition for food and space and predator attraction. It also ignores the impact of hatchery fish based fisheries on the conservation management of wild steelhead. While integrated hatchery programs can increase smolt to adult survival over traditional hatchery programs, the survival rate can be 20% lower than for wild steelhead in the first generation and 40% lower in the second generation. Integrated hatchery technology has not been fully tested and validated and it is premature to assume it will fix the problem of hatchery impacts on wild steelhead. However, this alternative gives the

integrated hatchery experiment an unqualified endorsement and paints a more positive picture than is supported by the science.

Alternative 2 would “accept some negative impacts as long as they are not significantly adverse to wild steelhead stocks or ecosystem health.” The DEIS should quantify “significantly adverse impacts.” This subjective approach to criteria opens the door to interpretation and disagreement and may not actually protect wild steelhead. Because of this problem, the alternative should be rejected because it is not sufficient to achieve its objective.

Alternative 2 could be strengthened by stating that each hatchery program will be subject to a risk analysis for wild steelhead. This risk analysis should be independently reviewed by an independent scientific team. Members of the independent scientific team would have no stake or investment in the hatchery program.

Alternative 2 relies upon adaptive management and monitoring and evaluation. Funding to support these actions is required so that the data is collected to support adaptive management. Since the alternative does not address either the kind of data needed or the funding to get it, the alternative is merely a promise that cannot be kept.

The combination of issues and problems associated with Alternative 2 make it unreliable and therefore unacceptable. It is likely that the default for hatchery management, given these problems, will be the status quo hatchery program similar to that described in Alternatives 3 and 4 and wild steelhead recovery will not take place.

3.2.2. Monitoring, Evaluation and Adaptive Management:

These alternatives, especially Alternatives 1 and 2, will require sufficient funding to provide the data support for making decisions and corrections. The DEIS should provide a detailed monitoring, evaluation and adaptive management plan and the funding needed to achieve it. Lacking this detail, the alternatives 1 and 2 (preferred alternative) cannot achieve the stated benefits with any certainty.

The major difference between Alternative 1 and 2 is the degree of scientific monitoring and evaluation. Alternative 1 would require all wild steelhead populations to be evaluated for compliance with VSP objectives while Alternative 2 would be based on a few “indicator stocks.” The agency is resistant to Alternative 1 because it would be more expensive. Alternative 2 assumes that all regional wild steelhead stocks would be similar enough to the indicator stock

so that it is representative of all stocks. This assumption introduces considerable uncertainty and the imprecision creates more risk to the entire DPS. This assumption should be tested before it can be applied with any reasonable hope that it will actually provide recovery of ESA listed and other wild steelhead populations.

Since wild steelhead are in decline across the state of Washington, it is important to establish a monitoring and evaluation program for each stock at risk. Alternative 2 should be amended to incorporate a program to monitor each wild stock to determine whether the VSP objectives are being achieved. In addition, the monitoring and evaluation plan should not be confined to habitat values, but also include hatchery fish interactions and fishery management operations to achieve VSP objectives by stock. Since the agency has direct authority over harvest and hatcheries, the monitoring and evaluation program should be specifically applied to make sure the agency is following through on its commitments.

Regulatory Compliance Alternatives:

The difference between Alternative 2 (preferred) and Alternative 1 is that under Alternative 2 all salmonids will be included in compliance evaluation while Alternative 1 will address only steelhead. It would be refreshing for the agency to finally address steelhead conservation as a priority. For that reason Alternative 1 makes more sense than Alternative 2. Since wild steelhead are in decline across the state, it is time that the agency focus on steelhead recovery.

The agency will adopt a steelhead conservation plan and it will have specific actions to ensure wild steelhead recovery and compliance with VSP objectives. Consequently, regulatory compliance should be expanded to evaluate whether the WDFW is following through on its commitments. For this reason, the DEIS should include direction for agency action compliance and have an independent audit of agency compliance done annually for the first five years then every four years following. This compliance audit would include the public as well as scientists and the results would be available to the public.

Conclusion:

The DEIS is too weak to expect recovery of wild steelhead populations in the state. The distinctions between Alternatives 1 and 2 are too often arbitrary. Alternative 1 is structured to drive the public toward the preferred alternative. In addition, there is often an opportunity to combine strategies in Alternative 1 with those in Alternative 2 and construct a stronger recovery plan for steelhead. Funding needed to support the data collection and analysis for achieving VSP

objectives is substantial but the DEIS provides no detail by which to make a decision about Alternatives. Based on the lack of information to identify VSP objectives, implement them, and monitor results in both Alternative 1 and 2, the costs would be the same.

Even though the reviewers are encouraged to support Alternative 2, there is no assurance that wild steelhead conservation and recovery will be achieved due to the assumptions used, the lack of data on wild populations to accomplish VSP objectives, and the lack of compliance monitoring relative to achieving VSP objectives. It is likely; that this DEIS will default to status quo in steelhead management unless it is strengthened in ways suggested in these comments.

Sincerely,

Bill M. Bakke, Director