

**NATIVE FISH SOCIETY
CONSERVATION REPORT
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By Bill Bakke, Director

ODFW'S WILD CHINOOK SUPPRESSION EFFORTS ARE FAILING: In the Willamette River wild spring chinook are increasing much to ODFW's surprise. They had to even upgrade their assumptions and estimates based on the 2008 run. Rather than 10-12 percent of the run the new information shows the wild chinook make up 27% of the run. In the Clackamas the wild run out numbered the hatchery run and above Willamette Falls the wild run is catching up with 5,722 wild fish to just 8,900 hatchery fish.

This emerging policy and management failure is due to several adjustments in management.

- A cap on harvest of wild chinook in the Columbia
- Selective fishing in the Willamette and Columbia
- Reduced harvest rate
- Wild only spawning areas on the Clackamas and McKenzie rivers

This slide into conservation management can be arrested if ODFW holds firm on established policy including: Continue releasing non-native hatchery steelhead into the Santiam, upper Willamette and McKenzie rivers with a good dose of hatchery trout to subsidize the guide fishery on the latter. These free range alien steelhead make good predators training for chinook. Continue homogenizing the spring chinook with the hatchery program by shipping eggs among hatcheries and resist any suggestion of local stock management. Continue to mix hatchery and wild fish on the spawning grounds. These policies should stem the gradual erosion of the cherished values of Willamette spring chinook management and fishery. Of course the only downside has been the poor survival of the hatchery chinook, leading to early closure of the Willamette and Columbia commercial and sport fisheries. But ODFW management knows they will continue to collect their checks each month even when the fishers are on the beach drinking coffee.

CORRECTING PROBLEMS FOR SILETZ RIVER SUMMER STEELHEAD:

The only Oregon coastal watershed (rivers that originate in the Coast Range) to support a native run of summer steelhead is the Siletz River. A waterfall provides a barrier to salmon and winter steelhead in the upper river but during low summer flows, summer steelhead can ascend the falls and occupy the upper Siletz without competition from winter steelhead.

In 1953 a fishway was constructed at Siletz Falls, allowing winter steelhead and other salmonids access to summer steelhead habitat. Wild summer steelhead numbers declined so severely by the mid-1990s that the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Commission approved changes in fish management and in 1994 access to the river above the falls was blocked to winter steelhead. This fishway includes a trap so that hatchery summer steelhead and winter steelhead are prevented from spawning above the falls.

In 2008 the number of wild summer steelhead passing the falls was 553 fish, well above the 1992-1997 average of 125 fish but lower than the 1969-1972 average of 712 fish. The ODFW says, "The consistent return of wild spawners over the last few years supports the success of Siletz Basin summer steelhead management." (Wilson 2009)

The agency responded effectively to the declining run of wild summer steelhead and made the management decision to correct the problem. The fact that hatchery summer steelhead and winter steelhead were interbreeding and competing with wild summer steelhead was recognized and biologists took the necessary action to cause a policy change by the agency. This is fish management at its best.

Reference

Wilson, Derek, January 2009. Siletz Basin Steelhead Trapping and Management Activities. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Salem, Oregon.

SILETZ WINTER STEELHEAD MANAGEMENT: Prior to 1996 Siletz hatchery winter steelhead were transplanted from the Alsea River Hatchery. These non-native hatchery fish were replaced by a native winter steelhead brood stock derived from steelhead native to the Siletz River. Hatchery winter and summer steelhead are now released in the Siletz River from native broodstock.

According to ODFW "Hatchery summer and winter steelhead programs are managed to provide a recreational fishery while minimizing the incidence of hatchery fish spawning in natural habitats. Under the Siletz River Basin Fish Management Plan (1997), hatchery steelhead spawning in the wild should be kept at 10% or less except in the immediate vicinity of the hatchery release site."

There are two monitoring sites for hatchery steelhead returns at Mill Creek and Schooner Creek, and it is at these two locations that the agency determines compliance with the Siletz Fish Management Plan. At the Mill Creek monitoring site hatchery steelhead average 78% of the natural spawners, and at the Schooner Creek monitoring site hatchery steelhead average 38% of the natural spawners. Clearly the hatchery steelhead program is not in compliance with the Siletz River Fish Management Plan which calls for no more than 10% naturally spawning hatchery fish. There is no information on the number of naturally spawning hatchery steelhead in other parts of the Siletz basin, but it is predictably out of compliance.

Steelhead have a habit of avoiding anglers and swimming on by. In an effort to make better use of hatchery steelhead, ODFW has adopted a practice of collecting hatchery fish that have “escaped” the fishery and running them back through it. From 2003 to 2008 the agency recycled (their term not mine) 987 hatchery steelhead and anglers reported catching 7 of them. In fairness to this well intentioned program to make better use of hatchery fish, not all anglers report their catch, but it would be remarkable if even a quarter of the recycled fish were harvested. The scientific literature is hard on the practice of recycling hatchery fish, indicating that it increases stray rates and interbreeding and competition between hatchery and wild fish. Since the program is expensive and fails to meet even low expectations, it should be abandoned. The excess hatchery fish are now released into ponds for fishing and distributed to food banks and used for stream enrichment. The correct decision was made.

Even though it is probably an unthinkable alternative, the ODFW could also reduce its hatchery steelhead releases so that there are fewer hatchery fish. This would help reduce the high rate of naturally spawning hatchery fish and expensive mop up work by the agency.

It is also time for the ODFW to address the number of naturally spawning hatchery fish in the Siletz Basin and bring the hatchery program into compliance with the Siletz Basin Fish Management Plan adopted by the Commission. Being in violation of administrative law should have consequences for non-compliance is placing all the consequences on fish not the agency.

Reference

Wilson, Derek, January 2009. Siletz Basin Steelhead Trapping and Management Activities. Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Salem, Oregon.

CAN THE PUBLIC BE AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE FOR WLD SALMON CONSERVATION?

Wild salmon are a common property resource and serve as a good example for tragedy of the commons.

Government cannot be an effective advocate for salmon recovery because the mission and institutional structure are in conflict with conservation, so it is up to the public. The public is not of one mind when it comes to salmon conservation so there are conflicts here as well.

The public interest in salmon can probably be described as 1) those who want to protect their economic interest from wild salmon – though hatchery salmon are okay; 2) those that want to harvest salmon and believe wild salmon are a constraint, and 3) those who would protect wild salmon and their habitats. Needless to say, the groups in the latter category are often small in size and poorly funded. Interestingly, government agencies are a blend of categories one and two with a dash of three for legitimacy.

Wild salmon are bad for business. If that thought is kept in mind all groups in each category are compromised. The groups in category three are affected when it is the perception of staff and leadership that being an agent for conservation impinges on fund raising so they pull back and become less effective.

Taken together, all public groups are compromised – some more than others – by their motives.

DESCHUTES STEELHEAD WEIR REPORT March 12 to April 18 2009

Bakeoven and Buckhollow Adult Steelhead Escapement project started in 2009. As some of you may know, due to some technical difficulties and foul weather we did not finish construction of the Weirs until about January 24th. We had been hoping to have the traps fishing by January 1st. The traps have been checked daily since construction was finished. The information that has been obtained so far has been fascinating and valuable. I could tell stories for hours about different aspects of trap operation but in the interest of saving time I'll just give you a brief summary of the results so far.

Buckhollow- To date 66 trout, 298 native steelhead, 24 hatchery steelhead and 1,509 large-scale suckers have been caught at the Buckhollow facility. In addition 22 marked steelhead kelts (hatchery), 2 unmarked (wild) steelhead kelts, and three Coho have also been put downstream of the weir.

Bakeoven- To date 49 trout and 15 native steelhead, 100 large scale suckers, 11 wild steelhead kelts, have been caught at the Bakeoven Facility

We thank Leif Rinearson, ODFW, for sending us reports of fish passage and tries to answer all our questions after dinner at the Rainbow in Maupin.

ANGLING FOR A FUTURE:

Angling is a personal endeavor. Each of us find it difficult to believe we have an impact on a salmon or steelhead run. Where it is legal to kill wild fish, how is it possible that taking a fish can cause harm?

We approach our fishing from the perspective of an individual. It is my choice to take a fish or release it. We may not put our actions in context of the fish, its habitat and the full effect that all anglers have during a day on the water, over a full season, or a lifetime.

A natural population of fish is dependent on the productivity of its habitat to complete its life cycle and optimize its reproductive potential. When a population is small and unable to fully utilize its habitat, each fish is important.

As anglers we may not view our few days on the river as having much of a consequence for the future of the run. Anglers may not be aware of the issues the fish must contend with in order to maintain a healthy population. To the extent that we are not aware, we are not well integrated with the fish.

We are fishing for potential spawners, fish on their spawning run. So some thought must be given to subtracting spawners that will produce the next generation.

Too many anglers are ignorant of the condition the fish and their habitat are in and the impact they have on the health of a population when they take a wild fish, release a hatchery fish, or take juvenile steelhead and cutthroat as legal trout. Too many of us have been trained by government hatchery programs to be disengaged. This lack of perspective and concern for rivers and their fish increases risk not only for the salmon or steelhead, it jeopardizes the fishery.

It makes no difference how a fish dies. A dead fish does not spawn. Salmonids taken by the commercial, sport, or tribal fisheries are all equal: they will not spawn or enrich their home streams with nutrients. The issue always has been the proper regulation of the various fisheries to ensure each river gets the spawner abundance it needs. The constant struggle to secure more of the allocation from some other user may make sense if all the fish are artificially produced, but it makes no sense when wild salmonids are involved.

A great many anglers are concerned about the health of wild salmon and steelhead and do their best to support conservation by organizing and being active advocates. Each fish is important to these anglers and when one is brought to hand it is admired and released. But there is a problem when hatchery fish are released.

I know some make the claim that by releasing a hatchery fish taken on a fly, they will make babies that take a fly. When a guide says it, we can be easily fooled because he is the expert, but in the end it's just a good business decision for that released hatchery fish means he has more fish in the river for his customers to catch. There is no evidence that a fish taken on the fly has a genetic predisposition that would result in its off spring being more responsive to a fly. Wild fish contribute more to the fishery than hatchery fish do, so it makes sense from a fishery perspective and for biological reasons to release a wild fish, but not hatchery fish.

Hatchery fish are a problem. It is recognized that they contribute to the decline of wild salmon and steelhead populations when they interbreed with wild fish and their off spring compete with wild progeny for rearing space and food. Releasing hatchery fish contributes to the decline of the wild population and impacts the fishery because it means there are fewer wild fish in the river. The only ethical position for an angler to take is to kill all hatchery fish that come to hand.

From my perspective fishing is at its best when I know the wild population is well managed, when their habitats are productive and when the fishing does not jeopardize their health and abundance. As an angler I have a future and the fish have one too. I know that our next generation will have an opportunity to enjoy the benefits that have

been available to me. I can look to the future with confidence that the fishery will be good, the experiences will create memories because the fish and the angler are fully integrated.

READER RESPONSE: "You are the most shameless, self-serving socialist on the planet. You care nothing about the planet, the fish or people. You don't work for a living, you slurp at the public trough -- cleverly disguised as charitable giving thanks to your socialist pals who stink up legislatures and bureacracies (sic) coast to coast. You and your ilk need your fins clipped - permanently"