

Department of Fish and Game

Current Issues

Fall 2010

Salmon Recovery

Fifteen unique population groups of coho and Chinook salmon, and steelhead occur in California. Four of these are listed for protection under the California Endangered Species Act, and the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) has a recovery strategy for coho salmon in place. Ten of these same groups are listed under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is scheduled to release recovery plans for all the groups by 2011. Recovery plans for coho salmon were prompted by unprecedented low numbers of returning adult fish that could spawn. The estimated population high for this species in California was in the 1940s representing 250,000 to 500,000 fish. Currently, population numbers are at their lowest of a few thousand fish only. When commercial catch numbers for Chinook dropped from their high just 20 years ago of up to three million fish to between 50,000-200,000 it triggered the recovery efforts for this species.

It is believed recovery of currently listed populations will address the decline in the state's salmon fisheries in two ways. First, directly by recovering depleted stocks that were once fished to the point where fishing is once again viable. Second, indirectly by improving the condition of regulatory-protected, depleted stocks to the point that continued protection measures do not impact (i.e., bycatch restrictions) ocean and river fishing on healthier stocks. Currently, recovery activities also infuse millions of dollars into local communities for recovery and restoration efforts.

Salmon recovery is a labor-intensive, expensive and long-term effort. DFG and NMFS manage the Fisheries Restoration Program (FRP), which provides grant monies for restoration and various recovery efforts. This competitive grant program's contributing partners, including DFG, federal and local governments, tribes, water districts, fisheries organizations, watershed restoration groups, the California Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps and private landowners, invest between \$3 million to \$17 million annually, depending upon budgetary limitations and project proposals.

DFG considers all options when discharging its duty as the state's fish and wildlife steward, and salmon recovery is a high priority for several reasons: to improve both ocean and river commercial and recreational salmon fisheries opportunities, to protect and recover California species threatened with extinction and to conserve one of California's most significant natural resources. To do this, DFG's Law Enforcement Division has identified salmon as a top priority species for patrols and investigations which will benefit recovery efforts. Also, DFG partners with NMFS to jointly implement recovery actions along the coast and in the Central Valley; consults annually with a statewide coho salmon recovery team made up of 20 partners including tribes, land owners, federal and state agencies and academia; supports recovery and restoration projects through the FRP; participates as a member of the North American Salmon Stronghold Partnership, an organization of five states, Canada, Pacific coast tribes and other organizations dedicated to protecting watersheds and populations of salmon (this requires formal recognition by Congress, and legislation currently is pending in both houses); and facilitating the California Fish Passage Forum, which focuses on removing barriers to salmon migration.