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ADMINISTRATION

Contact: Brian Gorman
(206) 526-6613
Todd Ungerecht
(206) 499-0786
Scott Smullen
(202) 494-6515

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**NOAA Fisheries Expresses Continued Commitment to
Pacific Salmon Recovery with New Hatchery Policy**

Agency Praises Regional Efforts to Protect Salmon through Habitat Projects and Hatchery Reforms

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) today announced its continued commitment to protect 27 Pacific salmon and steelhead populations listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), as it unveiled a new hatchery policy proposal and a report outlining its assessment of the current biological status of each of the West Coast's naturally spawning and hatchery origin salmon stocks. The listing of the stocks would be reinstated under the proposal. Two stocks have improved from "endangered" to "threatened." One stock has gone from "threatened" to "endangered," and one has been added as "threatened."

NOAA Fisheries' proposed hatchery policy follows a court's finding that the agency should better account for hatchery fish in its ESA listings. The new policy's central focus is unchanged from prior policy: the conservation of naturally spawning salmon and the ecosystems upon which they depend. The policy would consider hatchery fish that are closely related to naturally spawning salmon in all of the current ESA-listed salmon groups. NOAA would also take into account the fact that some well managed hatcheries are contributing to the recovery of species, some hatcheries are having little or no effect, and some hatcheries are potentially hindering recovery. Better management practices in the Northwest's hatchery system are encouraging and should continue to help speed the recovery of salmon.

"This hatchery policy will re-enforce NOAA's commitment to protect naturally spawning salmon and their ecosystems," said retired Navy Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Jr., Under Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator, adding that the proposed policy will allow 90 days for the public to weigh in with their views. "We commend our state, tribal, and non-governmental partners for helping to identify and address needed salmon habitat improvements, and also for their outstanding work to reform hundreds of hatcheries in the Northwest."

The proposed policy notes that increased salmon numbers alone are not sufficient, and that scientific studies have found poor hatchery management practices can pose risks to the fitness of naturally spawning salmon. The policy recognizes science is developing as to the potential contributions of properly and carefully managed hatcheries to the rebuilding of depressed natural stocks, and the important role hatcheries play in fulfilling trust and treaty tribal responsibilities. The proposal would restrict harvest of hatchery fish only to the extent necessary to aid in the recovery of listed fish.

“Although this status report does not propose major changes in the current classification of listed stocks, many of these stocks are in much better condition than when they were listed. Favorable ocean conditions have helped, but local recovery efforts are also making vital contributions. We are very encouraged by the local recovery efforts such as the Shared Strategy in Puget Sound, the Oregon Plan and Oregon’s ‘1010’ water quality initiative, and the Northwest Power Planning Council’s sub-basin planning initiative for Idaho, Oregon and Washington. We are also making real progress in reforming hatcheries to complement naturally spawning runs through efforts such as the Puget Sound Hatchery Reform Project, the Yakama Nation’s Cle Elum hatchery, the Nez Perce tribal hatchery and the comprehensive evaluation of Columbia and Snake River hatcheries,” said Bob Lohn, Northwest Regional Administrator for NOAA Fisheries.

Both the proposed listing determinations and the draft hatchery policy will be published in the Federal Register early next month and will be open for public comment for 90 days. Public meetings or “workshops” will likely be scheduled to allow interested parties the opportunity to present their views. The proposed listings would become final determinations a year from now; the hatchery policy will be published as a “final rule” shortly after its comment period closes.

Currently there are 26 salmon and steelhead populations under ESA protection on the West Coast. Twenty of those populations are considered “threatened” and five are in the more perilous category of “endangered,” meaning they are in danger of extinction. Today’s proposal would maintain most of those categories with the following changes: Sacramento Winter-run chinook would change from endangered to threatened, Upper Columbia River steelhead (whose population includes resident rainbow trout) would change from endangered to threatened, and Central California Coast Coho would change from threatened to endangered.

While no immediate change is proposed in the listing status of the Oregon Coast Coho , the stock has experienced a remarkable rebound. The Oregon Governor’s Office, in partnership with state and federal agencies including NOAA, is leading a scientific review of the problems causing the previous decline and the extent to which they have been addressed through Oregon’s conservation efforts. The results of the review are expected this fall and NOAA has agreed to reopen the listing determination when those results become available.

In addition, the Lower Columbia coho group that was a candidate for consideration just before the 2001 court decision is proposed for threatened status.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources, and the habitat on which they depend, through scientific research, management and enforcement. Our stewardship of these resources benefits the nation by supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, while helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources. On the Web: www.noaa.gov.