

Northwest Region

March 16, 2010



Questions & Answers on NOAA Fisheries' Decision to List West Coast Eulachon under the Endangered Species Act

Q. What did NOAA's Fisheries Service announce today about West Coast eulachon?

A. Today we announced that the southern distinct population segment (DPS) of eulachon has been listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The effective date of the listing will be May 17, 2010.

Q. What are "eulachon?"

A. Eulachon (commonly called Columbia River smelt, candlefish or hooligan) are endemic to the eastern Pacific Ocean, ranging from northern California to southwest Alaska and into the southeastern Bering Sea. Eulachon typically spend three to five years in saltwater before returning to freshwater to spawn from late winter through mid spring. In the portion of the species' range that lies south of the U.S. – Canada border, most eulachon production originates in the Columbia River Basin. Other river basins in the U.S. where eulachon have been documented include the Mad River, Redwood Creek, and the Klamath River in California; the Umpqua River in Oregon; and infrequently in coastal rivers (primarily the Quinault and Elwha rivers) in Washington.

Q. Why did NOAA Fisheries decide to list the eulachon under the ESA?

A. After reviewing the best scientific and commercial information available, we determined that the species is composed of two or more distinct population segments (DPSs). After evaluating threats facing the species, and considering efforts being made to protect these fish, we determined that eulachon spawning in rivers south of the Skeena River (inclusive) in British Columbia, Canada, to the Mad River (inclusive) in California, are likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future. The agency has termed this unit of eulachon the southern DPS. Eulachon populations are at or near historically low numbers and have nearly disappeared from several locations. Threats to them include climate change effects on freshwater and marine habitats, bycatch in the pink shrimp fishery, water management and habitat changes in the Klamath and Columbia basins, and predation by marine mammals and birds, especially in the Fraser River and coastal rivers in British Columbia.

Q. What is a distinct population segment?

A. The ESA defines the term species to include a subspecies or a distinct population segment (DPS) of any vertebrate species that interbreeds when mature. To be considered distinct, a population, or group of populations, must be discrete from the remainder of the species to which it belongs, and significant to the species to which it belongs as a whole.

Q. Why did NOAA Fisheries review the status of West Coast eulachon?

A. Any person can petition the Secretary (of Interior or Commerce) to list or delist a species under the ESA. Within 90 days after receiving a petition, to the maximum extent practicable, the Secretary must make a finding as to whether the petition presents substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that the petitioned action may be warranted. If a petition is found to present such information, the Secretary must promptly start a review of the status of the species concerned.

We received an ESA petition from the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in November 2007 to list eulachon populations in Washington, Oregon and California. After reviewing the information presented in the petition and other information readily available in agency files, we found that the petition presented substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that the petitioned action might be warranted. We initiated a status review of eulachon to determine if the species or distinct population segment(s) warranted ESA listing. We proposed listing the southern DPS of eulachon on March 13, 2009.

In order to ensure that the final action is as accurate and effective as possible, and informed by the best available scientific and commercial information, we solicited information, comments, and suggestions from the public, other governmental agencies, the scientific community, industry, and any other interested parties during a 60 day comment period. All substantive comments received during the comment period were responded to in the final listing determination.

Q. Didn't NOAA Fisheries already review eulachon?

A. No. In 1999, we were petitioned to list Columbia River eulachon. We did not accept that petition (64 FR 66601) and therefore no status review was conducted. After reviewing the petition, we concluded that it failed to provide sufficient information indicating that eulachon populations in the Columbia River may warrant delineation as a DPS for consideration under the Endangered Species Act.

Q. Why are eulachon important?

A. They're a small fish rich in calories and important to marine and freshwater food webs, commercial and recreational fishermen, and indigenous people from northern California to Alaska. They have a life history similar to that of Pacific salmon; hatching in freshwater, rearing and maturing in the ocean for two to five years, and returning to freshwater where they spawn and die.

Q. How does the U.S. listing affect the Canadian portion of the eulachon DPS?

A. The ESA listing affects only activities within U.S. jurisdiction. Because of similar concerns about eulachon in Canada, that country is reviewing those fish to see whether they warrant protections under its Species at Risk Act (SARA). We'll continue to coordinate with our Canadian counterparts on eulachon conservation.

Q. What will be the effects of listing the southern DPS of eulachon?

A. We will need to review various activities' impacts on the species (ESA consultation) and make adjustments to those actions if necessary.

Q. Has NOAA's Fisheries Service proposed critical habitat and protective regulations for Pacific eulachon?

A. No. In this final listing determination we announced that we'll propose protective regulations (if needed) and critical habitat in subsequent *Federal Register* notices. Once proposals are developed, we'll solicit information from the public about protective regulations that are necessary and advisable for conservation of eulachon, and biological and economic information relevant to making a critical habitat designation for these fish.

Q. Where can I get more information on this listing and the underlying science?

A. The *Federal Register* notice announcing the final listing determination, the scientific report reviewing the status of eulachon, and other materials are available on the Internet at: <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Other-Marine-Species/Eulachon.cfm>.