Feds release plan for recovering Northwest fish species

June 8 2015, byKeith Ridler

Federal authorities have released their final recovery plan for a fish species that teetered on the brink of extinction in the early 1990s in one of the Pacific Northwest's major rivers.

The plan released Monday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will create a self-sustaining population of Snake River sockeye salmon over the next 50 to 100 years, authorities said.

The run in 1991 was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act, kicking off a hatchery program that at first had only a handful of returning fish to propagate the species.

But last fall more sockeye, some 1,500 fish, made the 900-mile journey from the Pacific Ocean to central Idaho's Redfish Lake than in any year going back nearly six decades.

"I think this really does show the resiliency of the species," said Rosemary Furfey, the agency's salmon recovery coordinator for the Interior Columbia Basin.

The 6,800-foot-elevation basin is where the last Snake River sockeye salmon spawn. But officials said a century of habitat destruction, dams, chemical treatments that killed fish in the lakes and some years with poor ocean conditions for salmon survival combined to push the fish to the edge.

Now, enough fish are returning that the 431-page plan includes recolonizing two more central Idaho lakes—Alturas and Pettit. Years of work that involved removing fish barriers and buying water rights and land to make sure streams have water has made that possible, state and federal officials said Monday.

"I'm amazed at how far we've come," said Tom Flagg, a scientist with the Northwest Fisheries Science Center who's been involved in the recovery program from the start.

The recovery of the salmon has been mapped out in three phases, with the first phase simply to prevent the species from becoming extinct.

Authorities are now starting on the second phase that involves expanding spawning habitat to additional lakes and using the hatchery program that is benefiting from the increasing number of returning adults to bolster the number of young fish released into the system.

Chris Kozfkay, a research biologist with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, worked to select which adults to pair to maintain the genetic health of the species, increasing the chances of fish returning as adults.

She said biologists, who now have more fish to work with, are looking at releasing a million young sockeye salmon, called smolts, into the basin by 2017.

The goal is to eventually lift federal protections by having enough young fish surviving the journey downstream, several years in the ocean, and then returning upstream as adults to spawn naturally.

Specifically, the plan says the fish can be considered for delisting when the lakes have a yearly average of 2,500 fish returning from the Pacific Ocean over a 10-year span.

Greg Stahl of Idaho Rivers United said he's pleased that the hard work by state and federal agencies has prevented an Idaho species from going extinct.

But he said the plan falls short in not addressing problems caused for salmon by four dams on the Snake River. Idaho Rivers United has long advocated removing the four dams, and cites them as a major stumbling block for ever recovering sockeye salmon to the point where they won't rely on hatcheries.

"We clearly have a few differences in how to continue moving forward from here," Stahl said of reaching recovery goals. "We have to put pressure on those dams or we're not going to get there."

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Citation: Feds release plan for recovering Northwest fish species (2015, June 8) retrieved 17 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2015-06-feds-recovering-northwest-fish-species.html

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