

Truckloads of baby fish hauled to river in restoration plan

March 10 2017, by Gillian Flaccus



In this Thursday, March 9, 2017 photo, a juvenile coho salmon is held by a fish biologist from the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, after 500,000 smolts were released into the Lostine River in northeastern Oregon. The release is part of a project to restore coho salmon to the Snake River Basin, where they haven't been seen for more than 30 years. The fish were trucked from a hatchery outside Portland 300 miles inland to the Lostine River in a joint project by the Nez Perce tribe and state wildlife officials. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus)

These speckled, rose-tinted fish haven't been spotted in this bubbling river in remote northeastern Oregon for more than 30 years—until now.

But this week, the waters of the Lostine River suddenly came alive as hundreds of the 4- and 5-inch-long juvenile coho salmon shot from a long white hose attached to a water tanker truck and into the frigid current. The fish jumped and splashed and some, momentarily shell-shocked, hid along the bank as onlookers crowded in for photos.

"All of us are speaking from the heart and our gladness for these fish coming back into this river, bringing something that has vanished, but has come back," Nez Perce tribal elder Charles Axtell said. "We take care of each other and that's what we are doing—taking care of this fish. We are the circle of life."

The cohos' baptism in this far-flung river marks the end of one journey and the beginning of another—an attempt to restore a lost species to a tribe and to a region.

The fish, raised by state wildlife officials in a hatchery outside Portland, were trucked 300 miles inland in nine water tanker trucks equipped with highly sensitive oxygen and temperature sensors and a bubbling system that mimics a river's current. Now in the Lostine River, they must turn around and swim 600 miles to the Pacific Ocean over the next month and then swim home after a year and a half in the Pacific Ocean feeding and growing.



David Bronson, a driver who trucks coho salmon in water tankers for the state of Oregon, prepares to get into a truck filled with hundreds of baby coho salmon at the Cascade Fish Hatchery in Cascade Locks, Ore., on March 8, 2017. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, working with the Nez Perce tribe, is trucking 500,000 baby coho salmon 300 miles from the hatchery outside Portland to a remote corner of northeastern Oregon to reintroduce the species to the Lostine River. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus)

Biologists expect to see the adult fish returning to this remote corner of the state next fall.

Coho salmon once numbered 20,000 here each year and were part of a rich tribal tradition for the Nez Perce. The tribe was driven from this part of Oregon by the U.S. government more than a century ago, but its members consider the species critical to their history and have fought for years to bring back the reddish, hook-nosed fish.

Numbers of coho declined throughout the 20th century due to pollution, human impacts on their habitat, overfishing and the construction of hydroelectric dams that impeded their progress upstream.

The Nez Perce successfully reintroduced coho salmon into the Clearwater River in Idaho in the mid-1990s. The program was so successful that Idaho permitted non-tribal fishing of coho during one season a few years ago, said Michael Bisbee Jr., coho project leader for the Nez Perce. The tribe hopes to repeat the Idaho project's success in Oregon.



In this Thursday, March 9, 2017 photo, a display shows the different stages of coho salmon eggs at the Cascade Fish Hatchery in Cascade Locks, Ore. The Nez Perce tribe and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife worked together to restore 500,000 juvenile coho salmon to the Snake River Basin in northeastern Oregon, where they haven't been seen for more than 30 years. The fish were raised at the Cascade Fish Hatchery. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus)

"If we could get at least 800 total adults back from this release in a couple years here, that would be outstanding," Bisbee said Thursday, as he awaited the salmons' arrival. "I'm super excited. The tribe's been working on getting coho back here into Oregon for a long time and we're minutes away from making history."

As the fish waited in the truck under a steady rain, tribal leader Axtell welcomed them with a blessing and a traditional traveling song.

He then rang a bell three times, turned in a circle and watched with emotion as state wildlife workers poured the young fish into the current.

The juvenile fish are being released at a critical point in their life cycle when they learn to recognize their home region before leaving for the Pacific Ocean. Their bodies also are changing so they can survive in saltwater.



In this Thursday, March 9, 2017 photo, a water tanker truck holding hundreds of baby coho salmon arrives at the Lostine River in Wallowa County, Ore., after a 300-mile journey from a hatchery, and prepares to release the fish into the water as a crowd looks on. The Nez Perce tribe and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife worked together to restore 500,000 juvenile coho salmon to the Snake River Basin in northeastern Oregon, where they haven't been seen for more than 30 years. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus)

They face a long and perilous journey. The baby salmon must pass through several rivers before reaching the giant Columbia River and swimming into the ocean. Along the way, they must navigate hungry birds and sea lions, anglers and the hydraulic dams that power much of the Pacific Northwest and break up the highway of water they rely upon.

By the time the bulk of them return, the tiny fish will be more than 2

feet long and weigh up to 10 pounds.

"We'll be lucky if half of the fish we release even get to the ocean, and in the ocean only 2 or 3 percent will survive," said Becky Johnson, division director for hatchery programs with the Nez Perce tribe. "We would be really happy to get 1 percent of those 500,000 fish back. It would be even good if we got half a percent back."

Even such small numbers would be enough to start a renewed connection for the Nez Perce with their own lost home, said Axtell.



In this Thursday, March 9, 2017 photo, a juvenile coho salmon hides in grass along the banks of the Lostine River in Wallowa County, Ore., just moments after it and hundreds of other coho were released into the Lostine's waters from a water tanker truck that transported the fish 300 miles from a hatchery outside Portland. The Nez Perce tribe and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife worked together to restore 500,000 juvenile coho salmon to the Snake River Basin in northeastern Oregon, where they haven't been seen for more than 30

years. (AP Photo/Gillian Flaccus)

Multiple attempts to reintroduce coho salmon to the basin over the past century have failed.

But fish biologists, backed with lessons learned and the latest hatchery techniques, believe this time will be different.

"Just to play a small role in that legacy is really encouraging for me," said Jeff Yanke, a fish biologist with Oregon's wildlife agency. "I hope my kids and grandkids will be able to catch these fish and say that their dad and grandpa played a small role in making this happen."

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