

Sockeye salmon removed from flood-threatened Idaho hatchery

30 March 2017, by Keith Ridler

About 4,000 endangered Snake River sockeye salmon have been evacuated from a flood-threatened hatchery in southwestern Idaho.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game on Thursday loaded the fish at the Eagle Fish Hatchery west of Boise into four trucks for transportation to the Springfield Fish Hatchery in eastern Idaho.

The 4,000 fish are broodstock that produce future generations of sockeye. Officials say the primary fear was that floodwater would reach the hatchery's electrical pumps that keep oxygenated water circulating.

"I'm relieved," said Dan Baker, Fish and Game's Eagle Fish Hatchery manager. "I know they're in a safe environment over there and we can focus on some critical buildings here."

Snake River sockeye teetered on the brink of extinction in the early 1990s. They've been the focus of an intense recovery program centered at the Eagle Fish Hatchery after being listed for federal protection in 1991.

The Boise River is expected to remain high for two months as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers releases water from upstream dams to make room for snowmelt in the mountains.

Sandbags have been protecting the Eagle Fish Hatchery, but Baker said there are weak spots in the bank, and moving the fish to a different facility seemed prudent.

The evacuated include 1-year-olds, 2-year-olds and 3-year-old fish. The two older age classes have special tags so they can be individually identified to track the genetics of the population.

The Eagle Fish Hatchery has a lab to make sure its sockeye have genetic diversity so future

generations can eventually sustain a wild population in Idaho, the ultimate goal. Adult fish returning from the ocean travel 900 miles up the Columbia, Snake and Salmon rivers to high-elevation Sawtooth basin lakes in central Idaho. The hope is that the hatchery-raised fish and the returning fish will spawn.

As a safety net to the Eagle Fish Hatchery, another 4,000 sockeye salmon are used as broodstock at NOAA Fisheries' Manchester Research Station in Port Orchard, Washington, Baker said.

Eggs produced by that hatchery and Eagle Fish are sent to the Springfield Fish Hatchery to be raised into young fish that are released into the wild. Fish and Game expects to release about 735,000 young sockeye into Idaho's Redfish Lake Creek in about a month.

Gary Byrne, who oversees Idaho Fish and Game's hatcheries, said moving the broodstock will not interfere with artificial spawning in the fall. He said the broodstock will likely be back at the Eagle Fish Hatchery by then, and if not, they can be artificially spawned at the eastern Idaho facility.

The goal of a self-sustaining wild population took a hit in 2015 when warm water in the Columbia River Basin killed 99 percent of returning adult fish, with only 55 completing the journey. A trap at a Snake River dam captured another 35 sockeye salmon. Of the 90 total fish, five were released to spawn naturally and 85 went to the Eagle Fish Hatchery for artificial spawning.

The fish rebounded in 2016 when 567 sockeye returned to the Sawtooth Valley.

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