

NOAA Fisheries, West Coast Region

Columbia Basin Partnership: Toward common goals for Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead 10-18-15

The Columbia Basin is home to one of the richest arrays of salmon and steelhead in the world, and this wealth of anadromous species holds great ecological, cultural, spiritual, and economic value. Protecting, restoring, and effectively managing these valuable species is one of the region's greatest responsibilities, and one of our greatest challenges. The challenge is so great – spanning many overlapping mandates, efforts, and interests across the Basin – that it warrants a more comprehensive and integrated means of crafting common goals for both listed and non-listed Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead.

We at NOAA Fisheries will invite sovereigns and stakeholders to join us in striving to shape these common goals and participate in a shared path to recovery by engaging in an important new forum, the Columbia Basin Partnership. The Columbia Basin Partnership will provide a framework for developing quantitative goals for salmon and steelhead at the species, stock, and major population group (MPG), and population levels for Pacific salmon and steelhead in the Columbia Basin. The goals will be collaboratively developed to meet conservation needs while also providing harvest (including those necessary to satisfy tribal treaty rights) and fishing opportunities. Goals will be developed in light of habitat capacity, climate change and other ecosystem conditions that control natural production.

We are attempting, through the Columbia Basin Partnership, something that has never been done before in the Pacific Northwest. We are striving for a shared regional direction for Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead that (1) encompasses and reconciles ESA responsibilities, tribal and treaty trust obligations, and sustainable fisheries mandates; (2) considers the best available science; and (3) respects the roles and needs of sovereigns and stakeholders. Benefits will include providing a strong foundation for NOAA Fisheries' decisions on species recovery and management in coming years and ensuring our decisions reflect collective regional views. The Partnership's work, while complex, will be vital and will depend on wide, candid, and honest participation by all who care about our salmon and steelhead.

This paper outlines both how we got here and how the Partnership can lead us forward together.

Where we are: the current Columbia Basin landscape

The commitment of tribes, stakeholders, states, and federal agencies to Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead is clear in the aggressive recovery efforts that have been underway throughout the Basin for more than a decade. Many of these efforts are built around locally developed plans, which NOAA Fisheries has adopted to support ESA recovery mandates and involve hundreds of habitat restoration, hatchery reform, and fish passage projects. Other plans have been developed for different purposes, such as state or tribal fisheries needs, as well as management and mitigation

agreements. The result is that different organizations are using different measuring sticks that is, different definitions of success.

Where we want to go: the Columbia Basin Assessment

In 2012, NOAA Fisheries commissioned two neutral, university-based institutions to assess the views of states, tribes, federal agencies, and other stakeholders as to how the region should pursue long-term salmon recovery goals. Through an interview-based process called a situation assessment, the Oregon Consensus Program at Portland State University and the William D. Ruckelshaus Center at the University of Washington consulted more than 200 stakeholders, sovereigns, and managers for their insights on past, current, and future approaches toward salmon recovery, as well as for their thoughts on what has worked, what hasn't worked, and what might work going forward. The findings are outlined in the Columbia Basin Situation Assessment Report, available online (http://www.orconsensus.pdx.edu/projects_current.php).

The Assessment identified several common themes, concerns, and aspirations, including:

- The need for more coherent, integrated, and efficient means of addressing the complexities of salmon recovery;
- Recognition that effective recovery processes include a shared regional definition of success;
- The lack of common goals in multiple overlapping federal, state, and tribal recovery and management plans;
- A foundation of information based on good science;
- The need for greater efficiency, certainty, predictability, improved relationships, and durable solutions; and
- The need for adequate and appropriate funding, inclusivity, transparency, fairness, and equality.

Underlying those common threads is a shared desire for bold and effective leaders to resolve issues, develop broader support for recovery efforts, and move the region forward. Additionally, many participants want to see NOAA Fisheries serve as a regional leader in developing an effective path ahead.

Other regional organizations have since joined the pursuit of common, long-term salmon and steelhead goals for the Columbia Basin, further underscoring the conclusions of the Assessment. The Northwest Power and Conservation Council's 2014 Columbia River Basin Fish and Wildlife Program¹ calls for compiling and refining existing program objectives for natural-origin salmon and steelhead and, subsequently, developing and refining objectives for other anadromous and resident fish, ecosystem function, habitat, and the hydropower system. A recent report² from the Council's

¹ Northwest Power and Conservation Council. 2014. Columbia River Basin Fish and Wildlife Program. NWPCC 2014-12, Portland, Oregon, October 2014.

² Independent Scientific Advisory Board. 2015. Density Dependence and Its Implications for Fish Management and Restoration in the Columbia River Basin. ISAB- 2015-1, February 2015.

Independent Scientific Advisory Board also urges agencies to establish spawning escapement goals that will sustain fisheries and a resilient ecosystem.

How we can get there: A regional partnership

To frame a future for Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead, we must work together in new and ambitious ways. NOAA Fisheries envisions the Columbia Basin Partnership as a transparent partnership of sovereigns and stakeholders working together to develop science-based and results-driven goals for Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead. The goals will address concerns identified in the Columbia Basin Assessment, including integrating local and regional efforts, improving efficiency, and coordinating conservation, fishing opportunity, and harvest management over the long term.

The scope of the Columbia Basin Partnership is more comprehensive than any prior goal-setting effort in the Basin and will encompass:

- All ESA-listed and non-listed salmon and steelhead in the Columbia Basin, above and below Bonneville Dam;
- Ocean, mainstem, and tributary fisheries that harvest Columbia Basin stocks, including commercial, recreational, and tribal fisheries;
- Multiple geographic scales (Basin-wide, ESU, and MPG);
- All impacts across the salmon and steelhead life-cycle (e.g., habitat, hatchery, hydro and harvest); and
- Consideration of ecological conditions and of current and future habitat capacity.

The Partnership process is expected to generate quantitative, adult return goals at the species, stock, major populations group, and population levels for both listed and unlisted stocks. The goals will address expectations for conservation and harvest and be based upon the latest science, including current understanding of habitat capacity and climate change effects. Shared goals will enhance engagement and understanding by providing a concise, common definition of success, consistent means to measure progress, and improved public support for work across the region.

This regional collaboration will not result in any regulatory decision, obligate any party to undertake certain activities, or diminish treaty/trust obligations. The Partnership will strive to operate by consensus, seeking common solutions that work for all parties. The strength of the Partnership and its goals will hinge on the breadth of regional participation, collaboration, and commitment. We firmly believe that working together toward a common, long-term set of goals for salmon and steelhead will inspire our many partners to integrate their efforts to achieve those common goals.

The path ahead: How the Partnership will work

Guiding principles of the Columbia Basin Partnership will include:

- Meet tribal treaty/trust obligations;
- Meet ESA requirements and provide for recovery of listed species;

- Provide sustainable fisheries in a manner consistent with law and regulations regarding harvest management;
- Rely on the best available scientific information;
- Involve both sovereigns and stakeholders; and
- Develop a process compliant with all procedural requirements, including the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA).

Our first step will be to collect relevant information on current goals and conditions by the end of 2015. NOAA Fisheries will collect this information for listed and non-listed Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead, including species status, habitat productive capacity, current hatchery and natural production, natural escapement, and adult harvest data. NOAA Fisheries is also working closely with the Northwest Power and Conservation Council to compile information on existing goals in various Columbia Basin federal, state, tribal, and local planning documents.

Next, NOAA Fisheries proposes to invite a broad constituency to join the Partnership, starting a critical dialogue between groups at the regional and local levels. The Partnership will include sovereigns and stakeholders, as described below.

Sovereigns' Group

Columbia Basin tribes, states, and federal agencies have key roles and responsibilities for salmon and steelhead recovery and management, and they must provide structure for the Columbia Basin Partnership process to be successful. Together their representatives will comprise the Sovereigns' Group, a subset of the Columbia Basin Partnership. The Sovereigns' Group will establish operating principles, coordinate the process, establish subcommittees, and develop agenda topics, and insure compliance with procedural mandates, among other functions. It is anticipated that the Sovereigns' Group and other stakeholders who are part of the larger Partnership will usually meet jointly. However, the Sovereigns' Group may also meet in executive session, as needed.

The Partnership

The Partnership will include the Sovereigns' Group, as well as additional members representing several stakeholder constituencies, specifically:

- NGO/environmental groups;
- Commercial fishing;
- Recreational fishing;
- Utilities;
- River industries;
- Agricultural/irrigation; and
- Local recovery groups from each state.

The larger Partnership will provide the primary forum for discussion of regional integration and development of shared goals, supporting engagement between the Sovereigns and a broader stakeholder community. The Partnership will provide input to the Sovereigns' Group on process, substance, and policy issues. The Partnership will also serve as the forum to discuss and understand the rationale for disagreements; to integrate habitat, hatchery, hydro, and harvest efforts; to discuss

opportunities to exchange, influence, and develop relationships; to discuss and develop input and feedback; and to lead discussions on potential Basin-wide issues.

Broader public engagement

Partnership meetings will be open to the public, with meeting materials available on the NOAA Fisheries West Coast Region website. There will be an opportunity for public input during meetings. The Partnership will also pursue outreach and engagement through workshops, open houses, and other means to provide the public with opportunity to provide input and feedback.

Moving forward together

The time is right for the Columbia Basin Partnership. Many organizations across the Basin are working diligently on behalf of Columbia River salmon and steelhead but are focused primarily on their individual pieces of a shared future. The Partnership will, for the first time, bring those pieces together and link them through comprehensive, science-based goals for both ESA-listed and non-listed salmon and steelhead, with clear measures of success. We can expect numerous benefits, including greater efficiency in selecting recovery actions that best advance common goals, as well as improved tracking and accountability. Ultimately, we can achieve abundant, healthy populations of salmon and steelhead, providing a wide array of ecological, social, cultural, and economic benefits for the Columbia Basin.