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NOAA Designates Critical Habitat for Pacific smelt

NOAA's Fisheries Service today designated more than a dozen West Coast creeks and rivers, and their estuaries, as critical habitat for the southern population of Pacific smelt, also known as eulachon. Pacific smelt are small ocean-going fish that historically ranged from northern California to Alaska's Bering Sea. The agency listed the fish as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act early last year, and today's action is a requirement of that federal species-protection law.

Once areas are designated as critical habitat, new federal projects or permits and new projects with federal funding are required to ensure their actions do not adversely modify the fish's habitat. Designating critical habitat does not affect citizens engaged in activities on private land that do not involve a federal agency.

Although the designated areas – including the Klamath, Columbia and Umpqua rivers – comprise some 335 miles of habitat, there will be few changes to federal actions because these areas overlap critical habitat already designated for federally protected salmon, steelhead and bull trout.

Pacific smelt typically spend three to five years in saltwater before they begin returning to rivers to spawn in late winter through early spring. The Pacific smelt population has declined throughout its range, and NOAA Fisheries' status reviews found further declines are expected as climate change affects the availability of the Pacific smelt's prey, as well as the timing and volume of spring flows in Northwest rivers. Other threats to the fish include being caught as bycatch in commercial fisheries, and predation by other fish, birds and marine mammals. Commercial and recreational fishing for Pacific smelt ended in 2010.

Smelt were first described by Meriwether Lewis in 1806 during the Corps of Discovery; he lauded the fatty fish for their excellent taste. Historically, they played an important role in the culture of Northwest Indian tribes, representing a seasonally important food source and a valuable trade item. They are so high in body fat during spawning that they can be dried, strung on a wick and burned, lending another name to its list of aliases: candlefish.

A full description of the critical habitat designation is in the *Federal Register*, available with other supporting materials on the web at:
<http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/Other-Marine-Species/Eulachon.cfm>.

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