

Comments on Current Salmon-Harvest Management

Presented to:

US Congressman Norm Dicks (D, WA),
US Congressman Brian Baird (D, WA),
and
US Congressman Greg Walden (R, OR)

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Thank you congressmen. Washington Trout appreciates your attention to these important issues, and the opportunity to offer our perspective here today.

Washington Trout is dedicated to the recovery and conservation of Washington's wild-fish ecosystems. We represent approximately 2000 members throughout the region. Since 1989, WT has built a reputation among public and tribal agencies, the business community, scientific institutions, and community organizations for effectiveness, technical credibility, and a focus on the resource.

NOAA Fisheries, responsible for the recovery of ESA-listed salmon and steelhead, appears to use two major justifications for accepting current management approaches to salmon harvest. First, that current habitat capacity is fully seeded by existing spawning escapement levels, and second, the consideration of extra-biological mitigation for the risks imposed by current harvest management, specifically, the notion of what NOAA calls a "fair distribution of the burden of

conservation.” On close examination, neither of these justifications turns out to be entirely convincing.

The assertion that current habitat capacity is fully seeded is unsupported by convincing empirical evidence. Nobody could reasonably challenge or doubt that current habitat capacity is significantly reduced from historical levels, or that meaningful salmon recovery will require a sustained investment in habitat protection and recovery. But harvest managers are asserting that habitat is so limited that increasing spawning escapement would not increase salmon productivity, that those extra spawners would be essentially spinning their wheels, laying eggs that will not hatch, or hatching juveniles that will not survive to reach the ocean. Supporting that assertion would first require quantifying the full extent of all available habitat, and then demonstrating the latent productivity of that habitat. That simply has not been done, and likely cannot be done given our current level of understanding. Most independent researchers agree that the only effective way to determine the productivity of available habitat would be to allow spawning escapements significantly higher than current targets for at least two salmon generations, roughly ten to twelve years. That has of course never been done, and in fact most populations have suffered from chronic under-escapement.

To hedge this argument, NOAA asserts its unwillingness to impose on harvesters a “conservation burden” higher than they deserve relative to their responsibility for salmon declines. But it is not at all transparent how NOAA has calculated its equitable distribution of conservation burden. Exactly how are conservation-burden units quantified, and how exactly should they be equitably distributed? That calculation would have to be extremely complex and almost necessarily

subjective, first somehow determining each stakeholder's relative responsibility in salmon decline, and then factoring and cross referencing a vast array of societal costs and benefits. It is not clear to Washington Trout that these calculations would inevitably favor salmon-harvest interests. Nor is it clear to us that NOAA has the legal responsibility or right to codify this essentially subjective calculation; one wonders what timber, development, or agricultural interests might have to say about it, or how much progress will be made once that argument starts.

Washington Trout's skepticism of current harvest management does not exist in a vacuum. In fact it is shared by NOAA's own independent review body. The Salmon Recovery Scientific Review Panel was convened by NOAA to evaluate salmon-recovery efforts for "scientific credibility." The rotating Panel is made up of six highly qualified, nationally recognized experts in genetics, ecology, and conservation biology. All panelists have participated in National Research Council activities and hold prestigious awards, fellowships, and scientific and academic leadership positions.

In November 2001, the RSRP issued an unusually sharp report, harshly critical of the way NOAA manages the harvest of listed salmon and steelhead. The panel said they were "mystified" how NOAA could justify what the panel called "biologically unsustainable" harvest levels on ESA-listed salmon. They bluntly admonished NMFS to develop a more "rational policy."

Here are just a few quotes from the RSRP report:

- “We remain... mystified concerning the scientific justification for... the continuation of substantial or high allowable harvest rates on listed salmonid [populations].”
- “NMFS personnel... use subjectivity and legalism... to justify *biologically unsustainable harvest rates* on several listed [populations].” [Emphasis added.]
- “The... models used to set allowable harvests each year need to be much more thoroughly tested and validated.”
- “NMFS should develop a rational [harvest] policy that does not demean scientific common sense.”

Washington Trout was encouraged to learn that the RSRP apparently shares many of our concerns over the way ESA-listed salmon are being harvested. Unfortunately, instead of responding appropriately, NOAA dismissed and attempted to discredit the panel’s report, blaming the negative review on miscommunication, claiming they simply hadn’t provided the RSRP with “a clear understanding” of how the agency sets harvest levels. Responses from Washington co-managers were harsher, ranging from calling the RSRP inexperienced with salmon to accusing it of bias.

In March 2002 Washington Trout and nine other conservation organizations from Oregon, Washington, and Alaska sent a letter to NOAA objecting to its dismissive and unresponsive reaction to the RSRP report, and urging it to take more seriously its own scientific-review process. Specifically, we asked NOAA to: thoroughly examine and address all the criticisms in the RSRP report; specifically respond to the Panel’s recommendation to more thoroughly

validate its salmon-population modeling; and where appropriate, revise harvest-policies accordingly.

We never received any direct response. However, NOAA publicly declared its intention to prepare a “technical response” to the RSRP report. Over three years later, to the best of our knowledge, NOAA has not presented that response to either the RSRP or the public, while it continues to employ the same policies, techniques, and rationales so harshly criticized by its own science-review panel. We urge you to pursue these matters, and press NOAA for a credible response.

Salmon harvest remains a critical issue. While it is true that habitat protection and recovery will continue to be a lynchpin of the region’s recovery efforts, and that harvest reform alone will not be enough, it is equally true that current harvest management is jeopardizing salmon recovery. We applaud your efforts today, and we hope that you will continue to seek progress on these issues. Washington Trout has devoted considerable time and effort in this arena, and we have significant expertise. We respectfully offer you our perspective and our assistance in the future.