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Wild Fish Conservation Organizations Intend to Sue Idaho for Unauthorized Steelhead Fishing

The Conservation Angler, Wild Fish Conservancy, Snake River Waterkeeper, Friends of the Clearwater, and Idaho Rivers United yesterday sent notice of their intent to sue officials of the Idaho Department of Fish & Game (“IDFG”) and Idaho Fish & Game Commission (“Commission”) under the Endangered Species Act (“ESA”) for allowing sport fisheries that harm and prevent the recovery of wild Snake River Basin steelhead, including the iconic but critically low wild B-run steelhead. Returns of wild steelhead have been less than 50% of the 10-year average during each of the last two years, and Oregon and Washington have closed their steelhead fisheries for the year due to the perilously low return numbers.

“Idaho’s steelhead and salmon fisheries do not have an approval from federal regulators that authorizes the incidental take of wild Snake River Basin steelhead, nor any other authorization or exemption that protects these ESA-listed wild fish from this fishery.” said David Moskowitz of The Conservation Angler “We expect public agencies to obey the laws meant to prevent the extinction of wild steelhead.”

“The Snake River’s remaining wild steelhead populations are hanging by a thread due to dams, pollution, and mismanagement of sport fishing and hatchery practices,” said Buck Ryan, Executive Director of Snake River Waterkeeper. “The last thing wild steelhead need, given the very low returns, are anglers catching more wild fish while pursuing hatchery steelhead. Blatantly agency disregard of the ESA’s protective legal requirements is shocking and alarming in light of the state of Idaho’s wild steelhead.”

“The Clearwater Basin is, or was, internationally famous for its large, B-run steelhead. It would be tragic to lose runs in the Selway River, which has never been influenced by hatchery fish,” said Gary Macfarlane, Ecosystem Defense Director of Friends of the Clearwater.

“This fishery is unacceptable. While we doubt that the federal regulators can or should permit these fisheries, the public interest in the recovery of wild Idaho steelhead at a minimum demands that the State of Idaho comply with all ESA requirements,” said Dr. Nick Gayeski, Wild Fish Conservancy Fisheries Scientist. “The 60-Day Notice is intended to assure that the State complies with the law.”

“For years, Idaho has deferred to the false federal narrative that wild steelhead runs were on the rise when the data clearly show a steep decline,” said Kevin Lewis of Idaho Rivers United. “Idaho has a legal responsibility to comply with the ESA and do its part to help recover these magnificent fish.”