Wild Fish Conservancy
NORTHWEST
SCIENCE EDUCATION ADVOCACY

Wild Fish Conservancy Notifies NOAA Fisheries of Intent to Sue over Denial of Endangered Species Act Protection for Olympic Peninsula Steelhead

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SEATTLE, Washington—Winter steelhead runs in the Olympic Peninsula's four largest river systems fell 42 percent in the last thirty years. NOAA Fisheries' own status review team concluded that Olympic Peninsula steelhead face a "moderate risk of extinction," meaning the distinct population segment is more likely than not to reach a high risk of extinction in the foreseeable future. Yet, in January, the agency decided these fish do not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Today, Wild Fish Conservancy notified NOAA Fisheries (formally, the National Marine Fisheries Service) and the U.S. Department of Commerce of its intent to sue over that decision. The notice letter alleges NOAA Fisheries' 12-month finding disregarded the conclusions of its own status review team without adequate explanation. It also argues that the agency relied on insufficient conservation efforts and on state policies that are incomplete or unenforceable.

The status review team reported a "strong decline in the number of steelhead returning to the rivers of the Olympic Peninsula" and found that, until recently, a large fraction of returning fish had been harvested before they could spawn. Of the fourteen winter-run populations with enough data to measure trends, thirteen were declining and none were increasing. The team also warned that summer-run steelhead populations, an important part of the species' biological diversity, have dwindled to dangerously low numbers, leaving them vulnerable to catastrophic events and other threats associated with small populations. Despite their vulnerability, summer-run steelhead are largely unmonitored. The status review identified climate change, inadequate regulation, and overharvest as the top threats to Olympic Peninsula steelhead.

The decline of wild steelhead is not just a conservation crisis. It has real consequences for the people and communities connected to these rivers, from Tribal fishing traditions to recreational anglers and local businesses. Every year of declining returns means fewer opportunities to fish, fewer fish reaching their spawning grounds, and growing uncertainty about the future of a species that is part of the Olympic Peninsula's identity.

For generations, the Queets River has been one of the Pacific Northwest's most celebrated steelhead fisheries, drawing anglers to the region and supporting local fishing traditions and livelihoods. After eight consecutive years of wild steelhead returns falling short of Olympic National Park's 4,200-fish spawning

goal (the minimum number of spawning fish needed to sustain future population abundance), the park closed the river to recreational fishing for the 2025–2026 winter steelhead season.

In its 12-month finding, NOAA Fisheries said it was "unable to find" that Olympic Peninsula steelhead face a high or moderate risk of extinction. It pointed to generally good habitat and to supposed recent improvements in harvest and hatchery practices by state and Tribal co-managers, while acknowledging that "abundance trends suggest declining populations, [and] the response to recent management actions has yet to be seen." The same finding described the state's hatchery policy as "not an enforceable regulation" and reported no evidence that the hatchery monitoring plans it calls for have been completed.

"NOAA Fisheries' own scientists documented decades of decline and found Olympic Peninsula steelhead at moderate risk of extinction," said Emma Helverson, Executive Director of Wild Fish Conservancy. "Yet instead of providing federal protections and resources for recovery, the agency is betting on management changes that haven't been fully implemented, let alone proven effective. The public deserves confidence that decisions about the future of these fish are driven by science, not other considerations. The question isn't whether these fish can survive another decade of decline. It's why NOAA is willing to take that chance."

"The Endangered Species Act requires a listing decision based on the best available science and on the condition of the species when the decision is made," said Conrad Gowell, Legal Director of Wild Fish Conservancy. "Management changes whose effects have not been measured and plans that have not been completed cannot stand in for the protections the law mandates."

Wild Fish Conservancy is willing to discuss remedies with NOAA Fisheries during the 60-day notice period. If the violations are not corrected, the Conservancy intends to file suit in federal court, asking that the finding be set aside.

Wild Fish Conservancy and The Conservation Angler first petitioned NOAA Fisheries to list Olympic Peninsula steelhead in August 2022. After the agency missed its legally required deadline to issue a 12-month finding on the petition by seventeen months, the organizations sued NOAA in federal court in January 2025 and secured a court-ordered deadline for a decision. NOAA finally issued its finding in January 2026, declining to protect the species. Now, Wild Fish Conservancy challenges that decision.

To read the notice letter and learn more, visit **www.wildfishconservancy.org**.

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Wild Fish Conservancy is represented by Kampmeier & Knutsen PLLC of Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington. **kampmeierknutsen.com**

Wild Fish Conservancy is a nonprofit conservation organization headquartered in Washington State and working from California to Alaska to preserve, protect, and restore the Northwest's wild fish and the ecosystems they depend on through science, education, and advocacy. **wildfishconservancy.org**

Additional Resources

- **Notice of Intent to Sue**
- **12-Month Finding on the Petition to List Olympic Peninsula Steelhead, 91 Fed. Reg. 1449 (Jan. 14, 2026)**
- **Biological Status of the Olympic Peninsula Steelhead Distinct Population Segment (Status Review Team, 2024)**
- **Petition to List Olympic Peninsula Steelhead (Aug. 1, 2022)**
- **FOIA Response**