



Association of Northwest Steelheaders

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Established 1960

June 11, 2013

To: Chair Witt and members of the House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources

Fr: Russell Bassett, executive director

Re: Testimony on hearing for Impacts of Oregon Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan on Oregon's Salmon and Trout Enhancement Program

Dear Chair Witt and members of the Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today and thank you for your service to the great State of Oregon. My name is Russell Bassett and I am the executive director of Association of Northwest Steelheaders (Steelheaders), representing 1,500 members, most of which are anglers who reside in Oregon.

Steelheaders have been a longtime partner of STEP. If you were to quantify the total number of hours all organizations in Oregon volunteer for STEP projects and events, you would likely find Steelheaders is at the top or very near the top. This involvement includes running the Letz Creek Hatchery near Eugene, and participating in broodstock collection, fin clippings and acclimation sites.

Steelheaders' volunteering with STEP also includes monitoring, habitat restoration, kids fishing days, and public education. For the last year and half, we have been working in partnership STEP to create a volunteer guide for the Eggs to Fry Program, and we are in the process of purchasing a freezer trailer to expand nutrient enhancement efforts on Portland-area streams in cooperation with STEP. In addition we are a main funder of the semi-annual STEP Conference and also the fiscal agent for these conferences. Steelheaders were honored with five STEP awards at the last two conferences.

Steelheaders value the symbiotic relationship we have with STEP, and we would like to continue to strengthen that partnership in the future. In addition, we commend ODFW for focusing on what they can actually manage in the plan: hatchery and harvest. Federal recovery plans tend to spend way too much time focusing on things the agency can't manage or control. That being said, we do have several concerns with the upcoming Oregon Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan:

- Nowhere in the draft plan does it have budget information or even deal with hatchery space. These questions are not answered in the plan 1) How will the changes be paid for? 2) How does the plan affect hatchery funding? 3) How much hatchery space is available to implement the plan and how is hatchery space affected? We cannot support a conservation and management plan on that doesn't address fiscal impacts and hatchery space.
- We are concerned about the increase to wild steelhead harvest called for in the plan. The public opinion poll conducted by ODFW shows that more people would rather stay with current management than with new wild harvest. In addition, ODFW received staunch opposition from the stakeholders for this new wild harvest, and a recent Ifish poll showed more people would rather release a wild steelhead than keep one. We also have concerns about whether all the basins where new wild steelhead harvest will be created actually have the populations to support it, as monitoring is lacking in many of the streams. Steelheaders does support wild chinook, coho and trout harvest when those harvests are deemed to be sustainable by ODFW, but we support the catch and release of wild steelhead statewide. If the agency really wants to open up new steelhead harvest, it should do so on a pay-to-play basis. If you want to kill a wild steelhead, buy a harvest tag, and have the funds from that fee go directly to the monitoring and conservation of the populations.
- We are also concerned that this plan seeks to provide new opportunity to make up for opportunity taken away by removing hatchery fish, but does so in a way that doesn't really create much new opportunity. For example, both Yakuina and Coos bays are scheduled to receive 100,000 spring chinook smolts to provide new opportunity. 100,000 chinook, at best,

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will bring in 1,000 fish, hardly much of a fishery, and the only people that will really be able to target them are people with motorized boats to fish the bays. If the agency really wants to provide more opportunity, put 500,000 smolts in each of those bays. The token increases to opportunity like the highly limited wild steelhead harvest and a minimal amount of hatchery smolts put in bays, we believe, still create a net loss to opportunity when one considers the in-stream hatchery production that is being lost.

For good reason, anglers are very upset right now about losing fishing opportunity. Just take a look at the public opinion poll done for this plan that clearly shows a vast majority of anglers want more hatchery fish. In the past, we may have accepted the elimination or reduction of hatchery production in the hope that wild runs would recover to the point of harvestable numbers, but other than Oregon Natural Coastal Coho, it's hard to find examples or even hope that recovery will happen with hatchery elimination or reduction.

Steelheaders has a long history of supporting hatchery reform, but too often that has come to mean reducing or eliminating fishing opportunity. There are other forms of hatchery reform that have been proven to lower hatchery stray rates that do not curtail hatchery production and the fishing opportunity those hatcheries provide. These include using wild brood, acclimating, separating run timing, and trapping. Having hatcheries and the feeding done at hatcheries mimic the wild is another hatchery reform strategy that is very rarely used, but should be. Steelheaders believes the state and the feds should be breeding and training for a better product rather than just doing away with hatchery production.

Our hatcheries (and the fishing opportunity they provide) are at the most risk they have ever been from recent lawsuits. These suits include the Elwa River in Washington and the Sandy River in Oregon. Steelheaders and our allies the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association and Northwest Guides and Anglers Association came to the defense of ODFW's hatchery reform efforts on the Sandy that seek to lower hatchery stray rates while at the same time providing a consumptive fishery, and we were successful in court at keeping the Sandy's hatchery programs operating for now. Whether or not that was the last legal action against Sandy's hatchery programs is a big question. If any of these legal cases are successful, the ramifications to fishing opportunity cannot be understated, as it would likely set a legal precedence requiring modifications of Hatchery Genetic Management Plans to curtail hatchery production and/or wild brookstock collection on most rivers in the Pacific Northwest.

In addition, there are numerous limiting factors that continue to exacerbate natural production (starting in the ocean), and human population growth, climate change, and greed are not making wild recovery any easier. We believe our hatcheries are vital for ensuring salmon and steelhead runs continue for future generations to enjoy, to create future fish conservationists, to fund the agency, and to connect people with the resource.

It's time to start viewing hatcheries as a solution to much worse limiting factors, rather than as a problem to be eliminated or reduced to recover wild stocks, which in many cases won't be recovered by removing hatchery fish anyway. Steelheaders finds no optimism in the Coastal Plan that the agency is moving in that direction.

Respectfully,

Russell Bassett, executive director

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