

The Olympian

US Rep Dicks promotes wild salmon stocks

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Chester Allen

Too many hatchery salmon are spawning with wild salmon in the state's rivers, U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks said Tuesday, and their offspring are less likely to survive in the wild and return to the river as adults.

Dicks, a longtime salmon-recovery activist and environmentalist, brought his message to a state Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting in Olympia.

Recent studies — and scientists in the Hatchery Scientific Review Group — say that wild salmon should not spawn with hatchery fish, and wild fish should be used as the source of eggs and milt for hatchery fish, Dicks said.

"We have a chance now to go beyond just talking about this and doing something about it," Dicks told the commission. His appearance came one week after his son, David, a Seattle environmental lawyer, was appointed executive director of the Puget Sound Partnership by Gov. Chris Gregoire.

Biologists from the Hatchery Scientific Review Group, which has studied wild salmon breeding with hatchery salmon since 2000, agreed with Dicks.

Native salmon most fit

Wild salmon carry genes that help them make better use of the restored habitat in most rivers, said John Barr, group co-chairman.

Hatchery salmon often are originally from another river, and their genetic makeup is not as suited to survival in a different river.

Studies have shown that wild salmon runs quickly increase when fish from native stocks find better habitat in the river, Barr said.

"We get twice the benefit of habitat improvements by implementing hatchery reform," he said.

Barr, Dr. Lars Mobrand and Lee Blankenship told the commission that hatchery reform must include:

- **Marking all** hatchery fish before they are released into the wild, which helps biologists see how many hatchery fish return a few years later.
- **Allowing** anglers and commercial fishermen to keep the marked hatchery fish — and requiring that they release unmarked wild fish to spawn. That is called a selective fishery, and the state Department of Fish and Wildlife has been pushing for increased use of it for years.

Keeping hatchery salmon off river spawning beds allows anglers to fish for salmon while allowing wild salmon stocks to rebuild.

Dicks and members of the hatchery review group found a receptive audience from the Fish and Wildlife Commission and leaders of the state Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The commission oversees the state department.

Commission members want to work closely with Dicks to change hatchery operations as soon as possible, member Miranda Wecker said.

Changes in hatchery operations, as well as the use of selective fishing, will give anglers fish to keep and let wild fish spawn, Fish and Wildlife Director Jeff Koenings said.

Operations already have been changed and improved in some hatcheries, he said.

Funds, equipment needed

The issue now is getting the money and equipment to change hatchery operations and mark all hatchery fish produced in state, federal and tribal hatcheries.

Dicks, chairman of the Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, pledged to get more hatchery-reform money for the Northwest.

"Catching hatchery fish is a good thing," Dicks said. "We don't want them on the spawning grounds."