

2010: Reasons for Optimism

We are looking for 2010 to be another banner year for salmon and steelhead. The indicators are positive in terms of numbers, actions on the ground, and additions to our knowledge base about what these fish need.

For starters, another exceptional year is forecast for adult returns of salmon and steelhead into the Columbia River. And we'll take it, even though we know changing ocean conditions can swamp our manmade efforts and eventually what goes up will come down.



Implementation is another bright spot. While litigation over the federal hydro system Biological Opinion (salmon plan) drags on, the on-the-ground implementation has been fast apace since 2008. Many more measures are slated to come online in 2010.

[A 2008 progress report](#) recently released by the federal agencies summarizes salmon plan successes. As one example, installation of a fish slide at Lower Monumental Dam is resulting in young chinook and steelhead survivals of 97 to 100 percent.

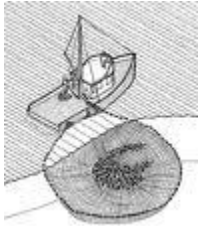
Capital improvements at the dams are only one piece of the implementation picture on the hydro system. River flows and spill, as well as a rigorous fish transportation program, play a role in increasing fish survival. In fact, recent NOAA Science Center research supports the plan's call for barging chinook and steelhead to the estuary in May to boost survival, as opposed to relying on the court-ordered spill. Hopefully, the court will take note of this science and move to approve the plan quickly!

We're also working to get a handle on predators. While sea lions capture the headlines, bird predation on young salmon is staggering. In 2008, Caspian terns consumed over 15 million juvenile salmon in the estuary alone, and cormorants averaged 6.8 million fish annually from 2003-2007. As part of implementing the salmon plan, the Corps of Engineers is relocating two-thirds of the Caspian terns to other sites and working on ways to attract cormorants away from the estuary.

Perhaps the most notable new effort under way is implementation of \$100 million in state and tribal "Accords" aimed largely at restoring tributary habitat. The highest mortality in the salmon

and steelhead lifecycle occurs when the fish emerge from eggs in their natal gravels. Quality habitat for spawning is imperative for healthy fish runs. While the fruits of habitat efforts take time to materialize fully, independent science review and advice on the Accord projects – through the Northwest Power and Conservation Council’s process – bodes well for successful results.

Other Hs (Hs refer to hatchery, habitat, hydro and harvest) that have a dramatic effect on salmon and steelhead survival are also getting more serious attention than in the past. Hatchery practices are slowly but surely being reformed to reduce effects on wild stocks, and safety-net hatcheries to reduce extinction risk are also in place as a result of the salmon plan.



Harvest continues to be a tough nut to crack since it involves tribal treaty rights, and fishing is a traditional way of life for many. The Colville Tribe is studying and putting to use fishing gear that is more selective in what it catches. The tribe’s work includes purchase of a purse seine net, which they have loaned to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife for its studies of selective gear. And in Oregon, the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) has launched a campaign initiative that if successful would require commercial gill-netters to move to more selective gear.

To wrap things up, the coalition of Sovereign states and tribes with which RiverPartners is working in the litigation is cautiously optimistic that Judge Redden may rule favorably on the salmon plan. Currently, there is a flurry of court briefings on how to incorporate the results of the Obama Administration’s “thumbs up” review of the plan.

Given comments by the world-class scientists brought in by the Administration to independently review the plan, there’s much room for optimism. The experts’ review included these statements:

- “It was a great scientific analysis”
- “It could not have been done better”
- “It was an excellent analysis that used the best available science that was used in an extremely thoughtful way.”

The Northwest is moving forward with the largest and most costly Endangered Species Act restoration effort in the nation. And we have high hopes for 2010. We anticipate steady progress in all four Hs of the salmon lifecycle and a leap forward for those of us who want to put our energies into salmon plan implementation.



Terry Flores is Executive Director of Northwest River Partners, an alliance of farmers, utilities, ports and businesses that promote the economic and environmental benefits of the Columbia and Snake Rivers and salmon recovery policies based on sound science.

For more information, please visit www.nwriverpartners.org.