



### **Hatcheries in the Spotlight**

Last month, NOAA-Fisheries released what could be a game-changing document for wild salmon and hatchery policy in the Northwest. NOAA is the federal agency responsible for protecting salmon listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and also ensuring opportunity for commercial and tribal harvest of salmon.

Under the law, NOAA is charged with – somehow – making these two conflicting mandates work together.

One way this has been accomplished is to release massive amounts of hatchery fish, literally pounds of meat, into the rivers hoping enough of them return to support a robust harvest. The problem is that the region is now learning the extent to which such a practice is having adverse, if unintended, consequences on wild protected salmon.

So what is the document NOAA released? It's a draft [Environmental Impact Statement \(EIS\)](#) on what are known as the Mitchell Act hatcheries. The Mitchell Act has a special place in the history of the basin's hatchery operations. The Act was passed in 1938 to conserve salmon and steelhead. It authorized construction of hatcheries in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Since 1946, Congress has appropriated funds under the Act to support these hatcheries and related research.



*Sawtooth Hatchery where natural conditions are mimicked in raceways.*

The draft EIS reveals some compelling overall facts about the region's hatcheries:

- The Columbia River Basin is home to 178 hatchery programs.
- Annual hatchery production is around 144 **million** juvenile salmon and steelhead.

That's a lot of fish! But there is much more here than that.

Specifically, the policy established by NOAA in its EIS will guide how \$11 million to \$16 million in federal hatchery funds are divvied up annually. The Act pays for 62 major programs that produce about half of the hatchery fish in the basin. NOAA says the EIS will guide federal hatchery policy in the Northwest and will "inform" a future review of individual hatchery programs under the ESA.

NOAA is clear it will not determine whether any particular hatchery program, no matter how large, complies with the ESA or how individual hatcheries should be operated. And it won't determine the maximum acceptable amount of hatchery production in the basin.

Whether it is in this forum or another, we urge NOAA to tackle these tough questions. There are significant issues about the interaction between hatchery programs and operations and their impacts on wild salmon productivity in the basin. They need to be addressed.

It is well understood that hatchery fish can compete with wild salmon for food and space. And, the latest research from NOAA's own Northwest Science Center – in studies of both chinook and coho – indicates a loss in genetic fitness as wild stocks interact and breed with their hatchery brethren. There is demonstrated evidence that *reducing* hatchery production *increases* wild production.

Newer and well-run hatcheries are becoming more sophisticated at reducing impacts on wild salmon. But, there is still a long way to go. NOAA's draft EIS seems a perfect opportunity, since it admittedly will establish hatchery policy direction for the northwest, to describe the pathway or identify the process it will use to make hatcheries more compatible with the ESA.



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For more information, please visit [www.nwriverpartners.org](http://www.nwriverpartners.org).