

Coastal Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan Mid-Coast Stratum Stakeholder Team

Meeting Summary

Date: October 15-16, 2012
Location: Newport, Oregon
Participants: **Stakeholder Team:** Bob Spellbrink, Stan Steele, Grant Scheele, John Sanchez, Corby Chappell, Wayne Hoffman, Stan van de Wetering, Ron Gerber, Joe Rohleder, Mike Laverty, Catherine Pruett (day one only), Brian Hudson
Staff: Rick Klumph, Bob Buckman, Derek Wilson, John Spangler, Dan Avery, Jay Nicholas, Todd Thompson (OSP), Tom Stahl, Kevin Goodson, Matt Falcy, Ed Bowles, Jim Owens, Debbi Farrell
Interested Parties: Jim Peterson, Kevin McDonnell, Jim Wright, Wade Dudley, Lee Fries, Mike Samples, Wayne Hill, Dave Landkamer

Welcome/Introductions/Review of Agenda

Jim Owens, facilitator, welcomed everyone at 1:00 p.m. October 15, 2012 to the Coastal Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan Mid-Coast Stratum Stakeholder Team meeting. The goal of the meeting was to review the draft (“strawman”) portfolio distributed by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) and recommend a proposed stratum portfolio to ODFW.

Ed Bowles, ODFW Fish Division Administrator, thanked the group for their participation. In the past, the development of management plans has typically taken multiple years. This process is an experiment to compress the planning process through development of a “strawman” proposal for review. The focus is on actions and risks, rather than abundance numbers. One of the goals is to balance conservation with fishing opportunities through management of hatcheries and harvest levels. The Department would also like to identify areas that would be suitable for wild fish emphasis and for harvest opportunities.

The process includes Stakeholder Team recommendations on portfolio objectives, hatchery fish programs, harvest programs, predation, and habitat improvements. Individual stratum team recommendations will then be integrated into a comprehensive coastwide portfolio. That integrated portfolio, along with the identification of any additional recommendations that are needed from the Stakeholder Teams, will be circulated for review to the Stakeholder Teams before a draft Plan is prepared. The format (meetings or via email) for receiving feedback on the integrated portfolio is to be determined. It is envisioned that a draft Plan will be completed in January 2013, at which time stratum groups are likely to be reconvened to review the Plan prior to it being distributed for general public comment. The process for review and approval by the Fish and Wildlife Commission will follow, with additional comment opportunities provided as part of that process.

Public comment will be accepted at specific times during stakeholder meetings, when a draft Plan is released to the public, and during the Commission process. There are comment cards available to submit comments in addition to the regular opportunities. The opinion poll is still in the process of being created by Oregon State University.

Decision-Making Basis and Scope

The group discussed the nature of the actions being proposed by ODFW. The “strawman” portfolio is intended as a starting point for discussions to assist in developing management strategies that achieve the goals of decreasing conservation risk and increasing fishing opportunity. Jim Owens reviewed the Operating Assumptions that were initially presented at the orientation sessions and that are to serve as the basis of the Stakeholder Team’s recommendations (Draft Portfolio, page 2). He then identified the two over-arching evaluation criteria that should be applied to recommendations:

- (1) Are the recommendations responsive to the Operating Assumptions?
- (2) Do the recommendations provide a balanced portfolio perspective, at both the stratum and coastwide levels?

Jay Nicholas, Wild Salmon Center, provided background on the concept of developing a portfolio of fish management approaches. He then provided historical information on abundance, harvest levels and composition of harvest for coho salmon, fall and spring Chinook salmon and winter steelhead. Coho salmon and fall Chinook salmon are most abundant; fall Chinook salmon harvest levels are higher including a large number of them being wild. Smaller numbers are harvested of wild coho salmon and winter steelhead. The majority of winter steelhead harvested are hatchery fish.

Tom Stahl, ODFW Assistant Conservation and Recovery Program Manager, summarized the Current Status Assessment previously presented at the orientation sessions. That assessment indicates that in this stratum all populations are healthy and viable, which does not mean that the populations are at historic levels,

Staff then provided a quick overview of the portfolio organization and strawman portfolio recommendations.

General comments included:

- More clearly label the “strawman” portfolio as such.
- The Plan needs to address the poor state of chum populations and include conservation-oriented management actions for this species. “This is an opportunity without opportunity cost.”
- There is more to do to reduce risk than the current assessment suggests. It paints an overly optimistic and generic picture.
- There are questions about the assessment of the Chinook population in the Salmon River as healthy.
- The presence of cutthroat and steelhead in locations other than the population areas mapped for the current assessment needs to be indicated (i.e., present in smaller systems which were not assessed).
- How is uncertainty being addressed? Have the risk error bounds been re-evaluated since the orientation sessions?

Objectives

After some discussion, there was consensus support for the following objectives as guidance for consideration of specific actions:

1. Protect and restore at-risk populations of conservation concern (per the Native Fish Conservation Policy)
 - Address limiting factors with appropriate actions and identify target threat levels to ensure there is no backsliding with healthy populations.
2. Protect rare species and life-history strategies (chum, summer and spring Chinook, summer steelhead, sea-run cutthroat)
3. Maintain overall hatchery production by using the best management practices and available science
4. Identify smaller or less accessible hatchery-based fisheries for shifts to other locations
5. Protect and emphasize current wild fish fisheries and maintain or improve them into the future
6. Seek new opportunities for both hatchery and wild fish fisheries
7. Identify and prioritize critical uncertainties, monitoring, and adaptive management practices

Hatchery Fish Programs

Kevin Goodson, ODFW Conservation Coordinator, provided an overview of the current ODFW hatchery fish programs and the strawman proposal for hatchery program changes. He noted that the Department's goal is to introduce wild fish harvest where there is low risk and any reductions in production are intended to reduce conservation risk by shifting impacts and improve fisheries at popular accessible sites. General discussion included:

- More detail is needed in the Plan on proposed hatchery management actions.
- Sideboards for and details of adaptive management are needed.
- Include rationale from District Biologists behind strawman proposals.
- How much risk to wild fish is too much is the underlying question to be resolved in hatchery management actions.
- The effect on ODFW's budget with reductions in hatchery production has to be part of the risk consideration.
- The Oregon Hatchery Research Center should be used to benefit hatcheries and fisheries, not just to reduce impacts on wild fish.
- Acclimation ponds should be explored as a means to reduce hatchery-to-wild fish interaction.
- New hatchery programs bring concerns about controlling stray rates.

A summary of discussion and recommendations specific to populations follow:

Fall Chinook

Concerns were raised about the hatchery practices at the Salmon River Hatchery. The group discussed strategies that could be used to lessen the risk by the hatchery. ODFW shared that there is work currently being done on the weir at the hatchery. Stray rates average around 50-60%. The Salmon River Hatchery is the only fall Chinook salmon program in the Mid-Coast area and is a treaty-required indicator stock for ocean harvest management. The Department recognizes the problems at the facility and will continue to make improvements.

Recommendation: Consensus to support the current program of 200,000 releases in the Salmon River, with the understanding that facility issues will be addressed (e.g., weir improvements, not passing hatchery fish above the weir, and using <10% wild brood during very low returns) and efforts will be expanded to reduce stray rates.

Spring Chinook

A proposal to release spring Chinook smolts in Yaquina Bay was discussed. A letter to the Port of Newport Bay Commission from the Mid-Coast Watershed Council and a response to the Council's letter from Salmon for Oregon were copied to Stakeholder Team members. ODFW hasn't determined the implementation details of the program yet but supports the idea. There is the possibility of a program similar to the one currently conducted at Winchester Bay for fall Chinook. There will be monitoring requirements and the program will have a five-year review clause.

Recommendation: General agreement (9 supportive, 2 opposed) to support the proposal to establish a hatchery program of 100,000 smolts in Yaquina Bay as an experiment to create a new fishing opportunity, with review in five years and termination of the program if stray rates exceed levels identified in the plan. The program also needs secured funding for all aspects (equipment and rearing/monitoring costs) to proceed.

Winter Steelhead

- There has been feedback from local fishermen that they do not support the proposed closure of the Big Elk Creek program; currently, approximately 60% of the catch is hatchery fish.
- Discussion on the proposal to maintain current release levels in the Alsea River noted the work being conducted by the Oregon Hatchery Research Center. Concern was raised that this area isn't managed like the North Coast – it hasn't been equitable. Would like to see catch rates improved.
- There was discussion about why the Siletz program was smaller than the Wilson River program. It was explained that this is a highly productive and successful program.
- The Florence STEP group does not support the proposed shift in releases from Lake Creek to the Siuslaw River; would prefer a larger number released without the reduction. The STEP group doesn't see how the area could support a wild fish fishery. ODFW staff indicated that the Department is looking into release strategies that could spread out angler pressure on the Siuslaw River.

Recommendation: Consensus to support the proposed strawman approach to hatchery winter steelhead programs, with the following adjustments:

- Continue current Siletz program of 50,000 smolts.
- Phase out Big Elk Creek program. Big Elk Creek to be managed with a wild fish emphasis. To improve wild fish production, and subsequent fishing opportunity, water quality improvements will be needed in the vicinity of major tributaries.
- Raise the cap on Alsea River releases from 120,000 to 140,000, and increase production and releases to this level dependent on the results of research on acclimation and predators.
- Phase out Lake Creek program and increase Siuslaw River program from 85,000 to 100,000. In the Siuslaw River, increase the number of release points and consider acclimation.

Summer Steelhead

Recommendation: Consensus to support proposed reduction from 80,000 to 50,000 in the Siletz River in order to reduce risk. This reduction should be reversed if monitoring does not indicate a reduction in risk has been achieved.

Harvest Management Actions

Kevin Goodson presented the strawman matrix for Retention/Non-Retention designations and associated Retention Schedule for proposed wild fish harvest changes. A sliding scale retention schedule was created to assist in determining retention levels for each Species Management Unit (SMU). A conservation level will also be identified to ensure the viability of populations is not jeopardized by harvest or other impacts. Abundance level thresholds for the sliding scale harvest matrix will be based on past abundance data collected. The abundance for each stratum will be looked at based on the sliding scale, rather than by individual water body. Escapement numbers will be evaluated as the process goes forward and adaptive management will be used to modify if necessary.

Comments included that cutthroat represent an opportunity to promote entry level fishing; additional opportunities to explore cutthroat fishing opportunities should be explored.

Chum, Summer Steelhead and Cutthroat Trout

There were no changes proposed by staff or the Stakeholder Team to current Non-Retention designations for Chum and Summer Steelhead or to the Retention designation for Cutthroat Trout.

Coho

Comments included that while coho are listed, the proposed bag limit restrictions make sense. If delisted, revised limits may be appropriate with a goal to expand fishing opportunities.

There was also discussion that closing the Siletz, Alsea and Siuslaw rivers to retention of wild coho and keeping the fishery only in the bays was discriminating against anglers that don't fish the bays. Only allowing harvest in the bays may also have a greater impact to the early portion of the coho run. It was also noted that the strawman document had an error in it with respect to the current designation for the Siuslaw River, which is that retention is allowed currently.

Recommendation: Consensus was to not support the proposal to change the designations for the Siletz, Alsea and Siuslaw rivers to Non-Retention, rather retain the current Retention designations.

Fall Chinook

There were concerns expressed about enforceability associated with the proposal to change the designation on Lake Creek from Retention to Non-Retention. The area has issues with snagging, but mostly during low water conditions. During higher water the fish don't congregate in the holes as much and can provide for a good fishery.

Recommendation: Consensus to not support the proposal to change the designation for Lake Creek from Retention to Non-Retention but instead lower the current deadline to Indian Creek and open this portion on October 15 to ensure there is more water in the river.

Spring Chinook

It was commented that research being conducted by the Siletz Tribe should be used to inform distinctions between spring and fall Chinook in the Siletz.

Recommendation: There was general agreement (8 supportive, 3 opposed) for the proposal to change the designation from Retention to Non-Retention for the Siletz Bay and Siletz River on a seasonal basis (2/1 to 7/15).

Winter Steelhead

Recommendation: There was consensus to support the strawman proposal to change the designations from Non-Retention to Retention in order to establish new wild winter steelhead fisheries on the Salmon River, Big Elk Creek and Lake Creek.

Retention Schedule

- Concerns were raised with how the percentage will be determined for very low, average and very high return years.
- If populations increase (especially for coho), the proposed schedule is overly conservative; a long-term goal should be to increase the harvest limits as populations increase.
- There was a desire to change the length limit for jacks in order to liberalize harvest on three year old males.

Recommendation: Consensus to support the proposed retention schedule, recognizing that it can be adaptively managed in response to research and changes in populations.

Mandatory Return of Tags and Guide Logbooks

Recommendation: Consensus to support the mandatory return of harvest cards and the re-make of punch cards; also, the mandatory use of guide logbooks, with the process for such developed in coordination with guides and the ability to protect proprietary information.

Angling Regulation Proposals

Bob Buckman requested the review of the current deadlines in the regulations for the Yaquina, Siletz River and Drift Creek. For the Siletz River, the group felt strongly about supporting a fishery along the river within the town of Siletz. This is a popular bank angling fishery, used by many.

Recommendation: There was consensus to support:

- A deadline boundary change to be near the head of tide for both forks of the Yaquina River, with final location determined by District staff (discussions were for Bear Creek/Updike Road on Big Elk Creek and Simpson Creek/Hwy 20 on the Yaquina River).
- For the Siletz River, closure from River Mile 41 up river and opening of the area around the town of Siletz (“town loop”). There was no consensus on whether the area between the Town of Siletz and Ojalla Bridge should be open or closed (the current emergency rule deadline is at Ojalla Bridge); research by the Siletz Tribe should inform whether Chinook in this area are genetically unique and warrant protection.
- A deadline boundary change for Drift Creek (Siletz) to Quarry Creek.

Predation Management Actions

Lindsay Adrean, ODFW Avian Predation Coordinator, provided an overview of the work being conducted on avian predation along the coast. This year there were five hazing programs. ODFW is currently in the process of requesting a depredation request to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for permission to lethally remove birds. The department is seeking partners for additional hazing efforts and to assist in gathering survey data.

Comments included:

- The question was asked why no new avian predation actions were proposed for this stratum; needs to be recognized as a high priority.
- Restoration activities are important to counter wild fish predation by providing hiding and rearing areas.
- Concerns were raised regarding pinniped predation and the need to increase efforts to control them.
- It was commented that size and bag limits for striped bass are counter-productive to salmon conservation.

Recommendation: There was consensus to support the strawman proposal to continue current predation management actions, with the note that avian predation control is a high funding priority.

Habitat Management Actions

Tom Stahl provided an overview of the habitat portion of the proposal. The Department does not have regulatory authority over habitat work; rather, it works with a number of other agencies, entities, and individuals on habitat restoration and protection. One of the goals of this plan will be to provide a “fish perspective” to habitat restoration work by identifying priority 6th-Field HUCs (Hydrologic Unit Code; “6HUCs”) to focus efforts that benefit fish rather than identifying site-specific actions or limiting factors (excluding populations that are currently assessed as “non-viable”), which are being determined through other efforts. ODFW will be collecting information gathered by other groups to identify areas for improvement.

The strawman proposal is for habitat improvement in 20% of the 6HUCs in each population. The percentage is meant to account for the various uncertainties in population numbers that will arise in the future (e.g., ocean conditions, climate change, development, etc). A goal that all 6HUCs are at least maintained at their current level of habitat quality is also proposed. The goal is to improve overall habitat function and quality in some areas without losing function and quality in other areas.

Stakeholders will be invited to participate on a technical review team that will review and comment on the methods used to characterize and prioritize 6HUCs. The meeting will likely be held in November.

Comments included:

- How will improvements be measured? Realistically, outcomes likely cannot be measured for at least 10 years.
- A 20 percent improvement is not an adequate goal. Should be projecting at least two decades out, with a goal for another 20 percent improvement in the second decade.
- The goal needs to be achievable and meaningful.
- Areas promoted for wild fisheries should take priority for habitat improvements.
- Hatchery programs and influence should be considered in habitat priorities.
- Need to coordinate with DEQ’s TMDL process.

Recommendation: There was consensus to support the strawman proposal for improvement in 20 percent of the 6HUCs, with the recognition this goal will need to be revisited based upon the work of the technical team and outcomes after the first decade.

Public Comment

Jim Wright, Salmon for Oregon, commented that they support a spring Chinook hatchery program and fishery in Yaquina Bay and Coos Bay.

Jim Peterson stated that the group should keep in mind that risks due to uncertainty need to be reduced.

Summary and Adjourn

In response to an inquiry from Jim Owens about how well the team's recommendations respond to the Objectives and over-arching evaluation criteria, the majority of members indicated that they were generally comfortable with the deliberation outcomes and feel that their recommendations provide an adequate portfolio perspective. One member indicated the need to see the details of how the Plan responds to Stakeholder Team comments before feeling comfortable with the outcomes.

Closing comments included:

- To increase fishing opportunities, the harvest of 3+ year-old fall Chinook jacks should be liberalized.
- More explanation of the justification for the strawman portfolio is needed in the draft Plan.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m. on October 16, 2012.