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

Meeting Summary

Date: September 4 – 6, 2012
Location: Charleston, Oregon
Participants: **Stakeholder Team:** Scott Starkey, Mary Wahl, Dick Stroud, Scott McKenzie, Larry Robison, Kelly Sparks, Aaron Loughton, Jason Robison, Joe Furia, Eric Farm
Staff: Ed Bowles, Tom Stahl, Kevin Goodson, Todd Confer, Mike Gray, Jay Nicholas, Steve Mazur, Gary Vonderohe, Jim Owens, Debbi Farrell

Welcome/Introductions/Review of Agenda

Jim Owens, Facilitator, welcomed the group at 1:15 p.m., September 4, 2012 to the Coastal Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan Mid-South 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?

The group agreed that the Operating Assumptions were appropriate sideboards for developing recommendations.

Jay Nicholas, Wild Salmon Center, 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, except the Elk fall Chinook population, are healthy and viable, which does not mean that the populations are at historic levels. The species addressed in this plan include fall Chinook salmon, spring/summer Chinook salmon, and chum salmon, winter steelhead, summer steelhead and coastal cutthroat trout. None of these species are currently federally or state listed as threatened or endangered. Coho are listed as threatened and are not addressed in this effort directly because there is an existing conservation plan for them.

Objectives

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

1. Maintain and enhance populations of conservation concern (per the Native Fish Conservation Policy)
   - Address limiting factors with appropriate actions and identify target threat levels
2. Protect rare species and life-history strategies (chum, summer and spring Chinook, summer steelhead)
3. Maintain overall hatchery production close to current levels; employ new tools, especially for declining populations
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. Work within the decision space identified from the current status assessment
8. Identify and prioritize effective monitoring, and adaptive management practices

Hatchery Fish Programs

Kevin Goodson provided an overview of the current ODFW hatchery fish programs and proposed changes. The various programs are at capacity with staffing and budget constraints. At this point, there are no plans to increase total hatchery production. 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. It has been determined that unfed fry are not proving to be very successful in providing fish for fisheries and cannot be marked. Releasing smolts provides much higher survival.

Points of discussion included:

- Increasing monitoring and evaluation efforts is critical to implementing wild fish harvests in any area.
- Finclipping efforts at the various volunteer hatcheries need to be at 100% of those fish released. Efforts have improved yearly towards this goal.
- Monitoring of potential impacts of a new Coos Bay spring Chinook salmon program is also needed.
- In response to concerns about reducing the Coos fall Chinook salmon releases in the Millicoma River, the Department noted the public's concern with the large hatchery footprint in the Coos area; the proposed changes are minimal compared to the very large number of releases being conducted (the Mid-South Coast Stratum currently releases over 2.8 million fish a year).

<u>Fall Chinook</u>

Much of the discussion centered on the Elk River program, with concerns raised about current hatchery practices at the Elk River Hatchery and the need to use the best available science. Todd Confer shared that the long-term average for strays has been 60%, but has been higher in recent years. Improved hatchery practices along with improving habitat and monitoring activities could be very beneficial for this population. Juvenile rearing habitat has been identified as a limiting factor below the hatchery. Ed Bowles assured the group that any discrepancies between hatchery practices and agency policy at the hatchery will be addressed.

Recommendation:

- Consensus to support a small increase in the Coos Bay Frontal program and the phasing out of the Millicoma program.
- Consensus to support the reduction from 175,000 to 120,000 releases in the Coquille system.
- Consensus to support the reduction in the Elk River program from 325,000 to 250,000, subject to application of management actions to improve the programs including:
    - Trap longer at the hatchery (early and late)
    - Improve genetic diversity when gathering broodstock (e.g., take later and older fish)
    - Improve ladder outlet (for attraction) at the hatchery
    - Explore additional attractant options at the hatchery
    - Improve nutrient enrichment above the hatchery if there are no disease concerns
    - Increase monitoring efforts with identified adaptive management thresholds
    - Establish stray rates
    - At the District level, manage emergency closures for fisheries if needed (e.g., to protect early returns in dry years)

- Place more emphasis on estuary enhancement
- Explore options to mitigate the economic hit to the troll fishery (e.g., allow harvest of extra hatchery fish)

Spring Chinook

Recommendation: Consensus to support the proposed establishment of a hatchery program on Coos Bay Frontal, with a release target of 100,000, with the recognition that new program funding will be required to establish and maintain the program and to provide ongoing monitoring.

Winter Steelhead

Recommendation:

- Consensus to support the strawman proposal to increase releases from 21,000 to 25,000 on Tenmile Lake/Creek.
- No consensus (evenly split opinions) on the proposal to increase releases in the Millicoma River to offset elimination of the program in the South Fork Coos River.
- Consensus to support phasing out of the programs on the North and East Fork Coquille rivers and to move this production to the South Fork Coquille, increasing that program from 70,000 to 100,000 releases.

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.

Discussion focused on methods used to calculate the abundance numbers and the bag limits for wild fish retention. There was concern that wild steelhead fisheries are being proposed without adequate data supporting that determination.

Coho, Fall Chinook, Spring Chinook, Chum, Cutthroat Trout

There were no comments on these programs and support for the Department's proposals (only changes to coho fisheries were proposed).

Winter Steelhead

Ed Bowles withdrew the East Fork Coquille River strawman proposal for a wild steelhead fishery. The Department will attempt to intensively monitor spawner escapement and harvest rates in one of the remaining two proposed wild steelhead fisheries (South Fork Coos River & North Fork Coquille River), though assistance with funding or volunteer efforts may be needed. The proposed reduction in hatchery production/releases will remain in all three areas.

Recommendation: General support (7 supportive, one opposed) for the strawman proposal for changes in Non-Retention to Retention for the South Fork Coos and North Fork Coquille rivers subject to several conditions:

- While monitoring should start immediately, wild fish harvest would not begin until hatchery fish are no longer returning (approximately 3 years).
- The goal is for exploitation rates to be below 20%; if higher, the wild steelhead fisheries or Retention schedule will be re-evaluated. If numbers are lower, wild steelhead harvest may be expanded to the East Fork Coquille River.
- The plan will include the criteria that will be used to close the fisheries if needed.

The data available currently shows a healthy population in these areas and it would provide an opportunity not currently offered. The ultimate goal is to balance conservation with utilization of the resource. The fisheries in this area are a tremendous economic benefit; the proposed fisheries could possibly maintain that benefit while improving conservation.

Retention Schedule
Recommendation: Consensus for the concept of a sliding scale for harvest and for the proposed bag limits.

Mandatory Return of Tags and Guide Logbooks
Recommendation: Consensus to support the mandatory return of harvest cards, modification of the information requested on harvest tags, and requiring fishing guides to submit log book information.

Predation Management Actions

Mike Gray, ODFW Coos-Coquille District Fish Biologist, shared that the District lacks data on predation. The Avian Predation Program is in its second year of cormorant surveys and the first year of hazing in the District. There has been an increase in the complaints about pinnipeds stealing fish off of lines, mostly harbor seals.

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 revising 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.

Recommendation: Consensus to support the strawman proposal for predation management actions, with aggressive action to remove newly introduced non-native species as they arise (eliminating established populations would be harder to achieve and would eliminate a very popular fishery).

Jason Robison shared that the Coquille Tribe would be interested in partnering to help manage predation concerns, and the Tribe is interested in subsistence take of double-crested cormorants.

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 but 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 working with 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 and others will be invited to participate on a Habitat Technical Review group that will review and comment on the methods used to characterize and prioritize 6HUCs. The meeting will likely be held in November.

Discussion included:

- The proposed 20% improvement, while possibly addressing uncertainty, is not adequate or ambitious enough to attain an improved desired status in some areas.
- How will a 20% improvement be applied where there were few 6HUCs in a population (i.e., where a single 6HUC was greater than 20% of the area)?
- Estuary habitat restoration in the Elk River is a high priority; anything proposed through this process should not hinder any work being done or proposed to be done in the future.
- Concerns with the multi-species and ecosystem-based approach for the 6HUC prioritization and the way it could impact the results (e.g., by factoring in coho salmon habitat needs in population areas more suited to other species, such as Elk River).

Recommendation: Consensus to support:

- A minimum 20% increase in high potential habitat areas for healthy populations (with more needed in the Elk River where conservation concerns are greater), based on the understanding that the Plan will in no way limit, and will encourage, efforts for improvements beyond this.
- Populations with few 6HUCs will need to have improvements evaluated at a different scale, likely by percentage of the entire occupied stream system in a population area rather than 6HUCs.

Public Comment

No public comment was provided on any of the three days.

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, members indicated that they were generally comfortable with the deliberation outcomes and feel that their recommendations provide an adequate portfolio perspective.

The group agreed that all Stakeholder Team members should be invited to the integration meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 11:30 a.m. on September 6, 2012.