

*Rogue–South Coast Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan  
(RSP)*

**2023 Annual Report**

Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife  
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## Introduction

The *Rogue–South Coast Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan* (RSP) was developed to ensure the continued viability and conservation of winter steelhead, summer steelhead, coho salmon, and coastal cutthroat trout Species Management Units (SMUs) along the Oregon Coast from the Elk River in the north to the Winchuck River in the south, and to achieve a desired status that provides substantial ecological and societal benefits. The RSP is consistent with requirements for conservation plans described in the Oregon Native Fish Conservation Policy (OAR 635-007-0502 to 0509) and was approved by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission in December 2021. RSP implementation is also guided by the Climate and Ocean Change Policy (OAR 635-900-0001 to 0020) adopted by the Oregon Fish and Wild Commission in July 2020. To track progress toward plan goals, the RSP calls for annual reports consisting of an update on plan implementation (this document), *Wild Fish Monitoring Summaries*, and *Hatchery Program Summaries*. These documents are available at the RSP website: [https://www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/CRP/rogue\\_south\\_coast\\_multi-species\\_conservation%20and%20Management\\_plan.asp](https://www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/CRP/rogue_south_coast_multi-species_conservation%20and%20Management_plan.asp). The 2023 annual report summarizes plan implementation since November 2022 and the most recent monitoring results available for each SMU.

## Progress Toward Desired Status

Table 1. Comparisons of current observed status with desired and conservation status thresholds for RSP status metrics (year in parentheses indicates most recent metric results available). Numbers in bold indicate values above desired status; underlined values are below conservation status thresholds (see *Wild Fish Monitoring Summaries* for additional details).

Status Metrics	5-yr average	Desired Status	2-yr average	Conservation Status
<b>Winter Steelhead</b>				
Coastal Stratum Juvenile Abundance Index (2022)	64,892	≥ 80,000	76,603	< 40,000
Coastal Stratum Juvenile Site Occupancy (2022)	<b>98%</b>	≥ 90%	99%	< 75%
Huntley Wild Half-Pounder Count (2023)	681	≥ 1,000	<u>285*</u>	< 300
<b>Summer Steelhead</b>				
Huntley Wild Late-run Summer Steelhead (2023)	7,151	≥ 11,000	6,168	< 3,250
<b>Coho Salmon</b>				
Elk River Spawner Abundance Index (2022)	245	≥ 800	371	< 150
Huntley Wild Adult Coho Abundance (2022)	6,121	≥ 10,000	8,429	< 1,870
<b>Cutthroat Trout</b>				
Coastal Stratum Abundance Index (2022)	25,446	≥ 28,000	14,412	< 6,500
Coastal Stratum Site Occupancy (2022)	<b>96%</b>	≥ 90%	95%	< 75%

\*Conservation status trigger for steelhead fishing regulations in the Rogue Stratum applies to the 2024-25 winter steelhead season.

## Management Actions

To address the limiting factors causing the gap between Current and Desired Status, and meet other plan goals, the RSP identifies strategies and actions in seven categories (*Habitat Actions, Other Species Actions, Hatchery Actions, Fishing Actions, Research and Monitoring Actions, Outreach/Enforcement Actions, and Facilities Actions*). The following sections have implementation highlights for each of those categories in November 2022–October 2023. The information presented below is not intended to be comprehensive and does not include many ongoing actions being implemented under the RSP. *Habitat Actions* are occurring across the SMUs at various scales; a sampling of those actions completed or initiated in 2023 are included in the highlights below.

### I. Habitat Actions

- **Action I.B.1:** Four barriers to fish passage were removed in the Rogue Watershed in 2023, directly benefitting native migratory fish populations. The ability for fish to move freely to different parts of the basin where conditions meet their specific needs at any point in their life (e.g., spawning, rearing) is critical to population health and resilience.

*Lovelace Dam* at river mile 3.5 on Slate Creek (Applegate River) was a four-foot concrete dam with an outdated concrete jump pool fishway. Its removal was led by Water Watch with funding from multiple partners and complements the 2021 removal of Harboldt Dam about three miles upstream. The removal of Lovelace Dam will provide volitional passage throughout the year for coho and fall Chinook salmon, summer and winter steelhead, Pacific lamprey and cutthroat trout.

*Takelma Creek Dam*, a 13-foot high, 70-foot-wide concrete diversion dam was removed as part of a larger collaborative effort to restore access to habitat for native salmon and steelhead in Takelma Creek (Deer Creek, Illinois River). For the first time in at least 70 years, Takelma Creek is entirely free-flowing at the former diversion dam site. This Water Watch project also included the removal of a second barrier on Takelma Creek—a perched, concrete box culvert—downstream of the dam. Wild winter steelhead and coho salmon will now gain access to at least two miles of spawning and rearing habitat.

Finally, a *push up dam on Lost Creek* (Little Butte Creek) will no longer be constructed thanks to a Rogue River Watershed Council project that constructed a new channel with woody debris to replace the dam. A screen was installed at this diversion for the first time in 2020 to keep wild steelhead and coho from entering the irrigation ditch.

ODFW contributed funds to all four passage projects courtesy of the \$8 million in Drought Funds appropriated to fish passage improvement projects during the 2022 legislative session. More work is planned as part of the Rogue Watershed Resiliency Initiative.

- **Action I.B.1:** Since 2004, at least 44 barriers to fish passage have been removed in the interior Rogue watershed, and 11 sites now have improved conditions for passage.
- **Action I.B.1:** As part of the Rogue Watershed Resiliency Initiative to attract infrastructure funding, the Rogue Fish District reached out to Josephine County Public Works to explore projects of common interest. The objective was to identify sites where ODFW needed

improvements for fish passage and county staff was interested in improvements to the road crossing. ODFW applied for Federal Highway Administration grant funding (USDOT National Culvert AOP Program), and received funds for work at three sites: Page Creek (East Fork Illinois); Iron Creek (Applegate River); and Fruitdale Creek in Grants Pass. Project completion is expected within two to three years. We hope to continue working with Josephine County and eventually Jackson County to restore passage and improve community infrastructure at these key lower elevation stream crossings to benefit Plan species.

- **Action 1.B.1:** In a related action, ODFW removed illegal dams on Bear Creek this fall prior to the fall chinook spawning migration. Additionally, enforcement action has removed or is close to removing additional barriers: two culverts on Caris Creek (Applegate River); a push up dam constructed illegally on Althouse Creek (East Fork Illinois); a dual culvert crossing that was illegally installed on South Fork Louse Creek (Jump off Joe Creek) at an illegal cannabis site; and a dam on Grays Creek (Applegate River) at another illegal cannabis site. Finally, a dam board structure on Fruitdale Creek in Grants Pass has been removed by the Oregon Water Resources Department after being discovered during fish salvage work conducted by volunteers in ODFW's Salmon Trout Enhancement Program (STEP).
- **Action 1.B.2:** A review of Rogue barriers began this year in preparation for the 2024 update of the Statewide Fish Passage Priority List. Many culverts were photographed to verify current status. A coordination meeting with Fish Passage Program staff held at the Rogue Watershed District office included a tour of barriers in the Little Butte subbasin and a discussion of various fish passage topics.
- **Action 1.B.4:** ODFW continued to monitor conditions for passage in the vicinity of the abandoned sewer line on Bear Creek in downtown Medford. Temporary structures were installed to help juvenile salmon and steelhead migrate upstream in summer. District staff assisted the Rogue Valley Council of Governments with the selection of an engineering company to begin designs on work to provide passage through this reach, funded by a WaterSMART Grant from the Bureau of Reclamation
- **Action 1.B.8:** Clearing for fuels reduction has resulted in riparian damage in several locations, prompting ODFW efforts to minimize and repair damage. District staff participated in call with ODFW, Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD) and State Fire Marshall's office (SFM) to discuss HB 762 which directs SFM to require defensible space around homes and businesses that are ranked in areas of high or extreme fire danger. More work needs to be done as the bill could confuse landowners into removing riparian vegetation, which we were assured is not the intent of the bill.
- **Action 1.B.11:** ODFW worked with the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries (DOGAMI) to finalize a restoration order for a mining operation adjacent to the Rogue Estuary.
- **Action 1.C.1:** The Rogue District assisted Trout Unlimited with interviews for the Rogue River Basin Water Project Coordinator, a position funded by an Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) stakeholder engagement grant. Assistance was provided to the new hire at various times throughout the year to facilitate instream water acquisition.

- **Action I.C.5:** In coordination with ODFW Habitat Division staff, the Rogue District began a long-term flow monitoring project on a tributary of Little Butte Creek to evaluate the effects of beaver activity on streamflow during drought. A former ranch is now the Vesper Meadow Restoration Preserve. Beavers are expected to colonize the creek as riparian vegetation heals from the impacts of overgrazing. Monitoring is expected to continue for several decades.
- **Action I.C.14:** ODFW continues to work with a local community group to advocate for riparian protection of seeps and springs that contribute cooler flow into Bear Creek in Phoenix. ODFW has been monitoring several sites and implemented a riparian outreach project on one (STEP project). The district supported the successful effort to name Blue Heron Creek, a spring-fed stream at Blue Heron Park, and is working with the group to fund the removal of a riprap berm to improve connectivity (and floodplain habitat) with Bear Creek. ODFW also deployed temperature loggers in the South Coast Stratum to assist with identifying cold water resources.
- **Action I.C.23:** Sediment is not a primary limiting factor in the interior Rogue, but excessive sediment associated with poor land use practices is a problem in some streams that have a granitic geology. Once disturbed, decomposed granite can easily run off into streams, effectively smothering fish eggs and burying spawning gravels. Rogue district staff contacted landowners on Walker Creek near Jacksonville to track down the source of excessive decompose granitic sand moving down Walker Creek into Jackson Creek and covering the substrate. With background information from ODFW, the Department of Environmental Quality was able to quickly follow up and create an enforcement order to stop the damage.
- **Action I.C.27:** ODFW worked with the Oregon Department of State Lands (DSL) to remove illegal fill in the Hunter Creek Estuary.
- **Action I.D.5:** ODFW is working with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to place additional spawning gravel and large woody debris in Big Butte Creek. Spawning gravel augmentation has been successfully tested in Big Butte as an action in the Rogue Spring Chinook Salmon Conservation Plan. See related information below.

## ***II. Other Species Actions***

- **Action II.B.1:** ODFW Marine Mammal Program staff conducted a public meeting to present findings of research on pinniped food habits based on seal scat collected from the Rogue Estuary.
- **Action II.D.3:** In 2023, ODFW continued an annual pikeminnow “roundup” in the Rogue Basin, encouraging angler harvest of non-native Umpqua Pikeminnow with a raffle, gift cards, and other outreach.

## ***III. Hatchery Actions***

- **Action III.B.1:** ODFW managed hatchery programs to meet release targets identified in the RSP, as well as Rogue Basin hatchery mitigation targets. Hatchery releases were affected by ongoing infrastructure and rearing issues at Cole Rivers Hatchery and the Anvil fire in the Elk River Basin (see Evaluation and Adaptive Management section below).

- **Action III.D.4:** In spring 2023, ODFW acclimated and released approximately 15,000 steelhead smolts at the recently established acclimation site in a tributary of Jump Off Joe Creek.

#### ***IV. Fishing Actions***

- **Action IV.B.1:** ODFW successfully implemented the new *Rogue-South Coast Steelhead Validation* and *Rogue-South Coast Wild Steelhead Harvest Tag* in 2023. The new authorizations were made available for purchase in late December 2022 and were valid from January 1 through April 30, 2023. In the inaugural season, 10,789 anglers purchased the *Rogue-South Coast Steelhead Validation* and 6,500 anglers purchased the *Rogue-South Coast Wild Steelhead Harvest Tag*.
- **Action IV.B.2:** In the 2022-2023 winter steelhead season, ODFW implemented interim winter steelhead angling regulations identified in Table 17 of the RSP. The interim regulations will also be implemented in the 2023-2024 winter steelhead season because indicators of juvenile steelhead abundance were above conservation status thresholds for both the Rogue and Coastal strata. In the 2024-25 winter steelhead season, there will be changes in angling regulations for the Rogue Basin because the two-year average for the Rogue Stratum indicator (wild half-pounder counts at Huntley Park) has fallen below the conservation status threshold. See page 86 of the RSP for more information about conservation status triggers and how they apply to the winter steelhead fishery.

#### ***V. Research and Monitoring Actions***

Tables 18 and 19 of the RSP provide an overview of base monitoring components being conducted within SMUs to track measurable criteria that inform progress toward desired status. Data produced from the monitoring will be used to re-assess abundance and productivity, spatial structure, and diversity in the 12-year assessment called for in the plan. Monitoring is also necessary to implement winter steelhead fisheries. The RSP also identified research actions to address critical uncertainties relative to each SMU (Table 20). Some of the research and monitoring actions that were successfully initiated in 2022, or in previous years during RSP development, could not be completed in 2023 due to unusual winter weather conditions. Research and monitoring action implementation in 2023 included the following:

- **Action V.A.2:** ODFW conducted winter steelhead spawning surveys in all six Coastal Stratum populations (Elk, Euchre, Hunter, Pistol, Chetco, and Winchuck) in 2023. However, due to extreme winter weather conditions that precluded spawning surveys for two months during the peak spawn time, ODFW could not estimate wild winter steelhead spawner abundance in any of the Coastal Stratum populations. The same extreme weather conditions, including heavy snow and an extended period of high stream flows, limited winter steelhead fishing opportunity and effort. Wild winter steelhead harvest was calculated using data from the new *Rogue-South Coast Wild Steelhead Harvest Tag* and estimates were low in all populations (see *Wild Fish Monitoring Summaries*). Wild steelhead harvest rates could not be determined due to the lack of spawner abundance estimates, but partial redd counts available in several of the populations indicated that harvest rates were below plan limits.

- **Actions V.A.3, V.C.1:** Snorkel surveys were conducted in each of three locations in the Chetco Basin (NF Chetco, Emily Creek, and SF Chetco) to estimate pHOS at the population scale. Extreme winter weather conditions limited snorkel surveys in 2023, but ODFW was able to conduct an additional pHOS survey in the lower Winchuck River that resulted in many fish observations (see *Wild Fish Monitoring Summaries*). ODFW will use snorkel surveys for pHOS monitoring in other Coastal Stratum populations as time and resources allow.
- **V.A.6. Chetco Creel Survey:** A winter steelhead creel survey was conducted on the Chetco River. The creel was used to generate harvest estimates for wild and hatchery steelhead, estimate total steelhead catch, and determine catch per unit effort in the fishery. The wild steelhead harvest estimate (148 fish) from the creel was very similar to the harvest estimate (143 fish) derived from angler reporting in ODFW's Electronic Licensing System (ELS).
- **Actions V.B.3, V.B.6:** ODFW conducted winter steelhead spawning surveys in the Upper Rogue population area in 2023, including surveys in the mainstem Rogue River and several major tributaries, to estimate winter steelhead spawner abundance. Using the spawner population estimate and an estimate of wild steelhead harvest from ELS, ODFW determined the wild steelhead harvest rate for this population, which was below the 15% limit identified in the RSP (see *Wild Fish Monitoring Summaries*).
- **Action V.B.7:** For the third consecutive year, ODFW conducted a statistical creel survey of the Lower Rogue winter steelhead fishery to monitor harvest and the proportion of wild and hatchery steelhead caught in the fishery (including steelhead caught and released). Due to poor fishing conditions during most of the season, the creel survey was not able to collect sufficient observations to reliably estimate the proportion of wild and hatchery fish. As a result, ODFW could not estimate the abundance or harvest rate for Rogue Stratum winter steelhead populations in aggregate in 2023. As noted above, the estimated harvest rate for wild winter steelhead in the Upper Rogue population was below the RSP limit in 2023. This population is expected to have the highest harvest rate in the Rogue Stratum because returning fish are exposed to the fishery throughout the entire Rogue River.
- **Action V.B.9:** For the second consecutive year, ODFW conducted snorkel surveys at index sites in core juvenile coho salmon rearing areas in summer 2023 to monitor coho salmon abundance and site occupancy. ODFW plans to evaluate these metrics more thoroughly after a complete brood cycle of coho salmon return (three consecutive years) but can report a site occupancy of 83% for 2022 and will report the 2023 data when it has been summarized.
- **Action V.D.3:** ODFW continued collaboration with staff at the State Fisheries Genomics Lab to evaluate the relationship between genetic run-timing markers and steelhead life history patterns in the Rogue Basin. A manuscript describing initial results of this work was published in the journal *Conservation Genetics* ([link](#)).
- **Action V.D.6:** ODFW continued a pilot project for monitoring early-run summer steelhead by distributing log books to anglers fishing for summer steelhead in the Upper Rogue from June-September.

## ***VI. Outreach/Enforcement Actions***

- **Action VI.B.6:** A new *Rogue-South Coast Steelhead Validation* webpage ([link](#)) was developed at the MyODFW.com website to provide all the information an angler needed to understand the new winter steelhead licensing requirements and answer frequently asked questions.
- **VI.D.5:** ODFW developed an online paper tag reporting option in ELS for the *Rogue-South Coast Steelhead Wild Steelhead Harvest Tag*.
- **Action VI.E.3:** ODFW continued to partner with OSP on an expanded program of enforcement floats on the Upper Rogue. Directed at snagging during the spring chinook season, the blitz also facilitated interaction with early run summer steelhead anglers.
- **Action VI.F.1:** OSP conducted enforcement of the Rogue estuary coho fishery in September 2023
- **Action VI.H.1:** The 2022 RSP Annual Report was completed and posted online in November 2022.

## ***VII. Facilities Actions***

- **Action VII.A.1:** Extensive time was spent responding to ongoing infrastructure problems at Cole Rivers Hatchery. A variety of partners are working to acquire funds to help the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) implement repairs and renovation at the aging facility. The powerline for the hatchery was repaired this past summer after a failure in April 2021 forced the facility to operate on partial power using back-up generators.
- **Action VII.A.3:** UTV was purchased for Elk River Hatchery.
- **Action VII.C.1:** Satellite tags were purchased for a pilot project to learn more about the ocean distribution of Rogue winter steelhead. Similar work has been done in California, Washington, and Alaska. Tagging is expected to be completed during the 2023-2024 run year.

## **Evaluation and Adaptive Management**

The previously discussed monitoring efforts and subsequent evaluation and adaptive management are important components of RSP implementation. Key evaluation and adaptive management actions that occurred in 2023 include the following:

- District staff developed recommendations to adapt hatchery production to problems (e.g., inability to meet size at release targets; production losses) in ways to minimize impacts to naturally produced fish and minimize impacts to anglers. District staff worked with fish propagation staff to communicate recommendations to the USACE and coordinate on renovation planning and implementation.
- In fall 2023, approximately 23,000 Chetco winter steelhead hatchery smolts were coded wire tagged for release. Coded wire tags will assist in monitoring straying and ocean distribution, and evaluating any future acclimation sites. These fish were released in September of 2023, approximately seven months early, due to the Anvil Creek fire evacuations.



## Other

- In a new initiative, Rogue staff have organized a planning team to scope spawning gravel restoration below USACE dams and targeted augmentation. Leading the plan team is Jim Peterson from the Oregon Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit. Participants to date include representatives from the US Forest Service (USFS), BLM, US Geological Survey (USGS), and USACE, along with Rogue Fish District staff. The work will implement management actions in the Rogue spring and fall Chinook conservation plans, and will also benefit wild winter steelhead that spawn in mainstem reaches of the Applegate and upper Rogue, in addition to providing general ecological uplift.
- Rogue staff continued to work with ODFW Water Program staff and multiple partners to submit grant applications in support of the Rogue Watershed Resiliency Initiative, one of ODFW's focal areas for acquiring infrastructure funding. In addition to the Josephine County culvert project mentioned above, ODFW submitted an application for riparian restoration and upland fuels reduction on Little Butte Creek (Denman Wildlife Area), worked with the Medford Water Commission on an application for water quality sondes in the Little Butte Creek confluence with the Rogue, and submitted an America the Beautiful planning grant for spawning gravel engineering support. Rogue staff are currently working with partners to submit applications for Private Forest Accord mitigation funding.
- Illegal cannabis operations and illegal activities at legal operations continue to pose environmental risk. District staff made recommendations to improve interagency communication and enforcement to the primary regulatory agencies, participated in follow up inspections, and conducted training for the Oregon State Police Drug Enforcement Section on what to look for regarding environmental violations.

## Summary

Highlights for the reporting year include the completion of several fish passage projects in the interior Rogue, new initiatives to address primary limiting factors and complete conservation plan actions, and successful implementation of the new winter steelhead fishing validation and harvest tag. Additional staff and resources dedicated to the planning area since RSP adoption facilitated a full year of monitoring activities in year two of the plan, although severe winter weather affected winter steelhead monitoring. ODFW will continue to refine monitoring methods based on lessons learned over the past two years, and a research project is cued up to provide new information on ocean distribution of steelhead. Wild half pounder returns have declined from very high levels two years ago to a point triggering changes to Rogue winter steelhead fishing in run year 2024-2025. Other measurable criteria for fish populations covered by the plan are well above conservation status levels, and some have remained above desired status thresholds, despite the multi-year drought affecting a large portion of the region. In particular, Rogue summer steelhead have shown greater resilience compared to returns during the previous drought cycle in the early 1990s and relative to other summer steelhead populations in Oregon.