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NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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Puget Sound Steelhead Get Protection under Endangered Species Act

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) announced today that it is listing Puget Sound steelhead as "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act. The agency proposed the listing just over a year ago in response to a petition from Sam Wright of Olympia, Wash.

The listing covers naturally spawned steelhead from river basins in Puget Sound, Hood Canal and the eastern half of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Also covered by today's action are two winter-run hatchery stocks: the Green River natural and Hamma Hamma River.

NOAA Fisheries Service said it looked at the biological status of Puget Sound steelhead as recently as 1996, but at that time the population did not warrant listing under the federal species-protection law. Since then, however, agency biologists say there have been continued widespread declines in the fish's population, despite substantial reductions in the harvest of natural steelhead.

NOAA's Northwest Regional Fisheries Director, Bob Lohn, said vital work on steelhead recovery was already under way. Steelhead share many of the same waters as Puget Sound Chinook, which are already protected under the ESA.

"The work already accomplished by Shared Strategy, the sound's grassroots salmon-recovery coalition, will provide a solid foundation for the recovery of steelhead," Lohn said. "We'll continue to work with Shared Strategy, the tribes, Puget Sound Partnership, the state and others to assure that any additional effort needed to specifically benefit steelhead is included as part of a salmon recovery plan."

Lohn also praised the ongoing collaborative efforts of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Puget Sound treaty tribes to develop watershed-based management plans to serve as what he called "the building blocks of a statewide steelhead-conservation strategy."

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The steelhead populations in today's action include more than 50 stocks of summer- and winter-run fish, the latter being the more widespread and numerous of the two. Most steelhead are found in northern Puget Sound where the Skagit and Snohomish rivers support the largest populations.

Biologists with the agency said the root causes for the steelhead population's decline likely include degraded habitat, blockages by dams and other man-made barriers, unfavorable ocean conditions and harmful hatchery practices.

A species categorized as "endangered" is in danger of extinction. One listed as "threatened" is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future.

Puget Sound has three other fish species protected by the federal Endangered Species Act: Puget Sound Chinook salmon, Hood Canal summer-run chum salmon and bull trout. These species overlap some of the range occupied by steelhead, a species that tends to use smaller streams and migrate further upstream in Puget Sound watersheds.

Steelhead are a popular gamefish and have an unusual life history that makes studying and protecting them a challenge. Unlike most other members of the Pacific salmon family, steelhead do not necessarily die after spawning, and some can remain in fresh water as resident rainbow trout, although rainbows are not covered by today's listing.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and its habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

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