New report charts Columbia salmon progress

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

Posted on : December 22, 2009 at 5:32 am

PORTLAND, Ore. – Rising numbers of Columbia River salmon and steelhead benefited last year from safer passage through dams, lower predation, more than 260 miles of reopened stream habitat and other measures charted in a new federal assessment of progress for the protected fish. The 2008 progress report released today describes the work of federal agencies during the first year of the 2008 Biological Opinion on the Federal Columbia River Power System, which specifies how agencies will protect fish from the impacts of hydroelectric dams. The results demonstrate that the strategy of aiding threatened and endangered fish at each step of their lives is helping return more salmon to recently restored rivers and streams.

The report is available online at www.salmonrecovery.gov and cites accomplishments including nearly 11,000 acres of newly protected and replanted habitat and more than 15,000 acre-feet of newly secured river and stream flows.

“We’re not only seeing that more fish make it past the dams safely, but we’re also looking beyond the dams to make sure they have what they need elsewhere in the system, too,” said Bill McDonald, Pacific Northwest regional director for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. “While this reflects only the first year of the BiOp, it’s setting the direction for the years to come.”

The Biological Opinion requires the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and Bonneville Power Administration to regularly examine their progress on salmon protection and address any shortcomings. The first-year report concludes the agencies are on track to meet science-driven targets for boosting fish survival through dams to 96 percent or 93 percent, depending on species.

It details actions that are helping fish overcome challenges throughout the system:

*** Hydropower:** A new passage system, called a spillway weir, now provides safe passage at Lower Monumental Dam for nearly 100 percent of yearling chinook and steelhead and 97 percent of sub-yearling chinook that pass over it.

* **Habitat:** Young migrating salmon are finding refuge in newly protected intertidal wetlands in the Columbia estuary near Longview, Wash. The estuary is a critical nursery where salmon gain strength before heading to sea.

*** Hatcheries:** Agencies have begun planning to shift steelhead hatcheries in Washington to fish adapted to local streams. At the same time, hatcheries helped bring Snake River sockeye from near-extinction. The 2008 sockeye return was the largest since 1956.

*** Harvest:** Agencies funded a study of selective fishing methods, and found that purse seine fishing does not harm protected fish. Protected salmon could be released while hatchery fish are harvested. The studies are continuing.

Further examples, illustrated with maps and charts, are cited throughout the report. Many projects have multiple benefits: habitat restoration, for instance, provides local jobs while boosting the resilience of fish to climate change.

The report comes a few months past its planned release because ongoing litigation over the biological opinion has diverted staff and resources. The report's release comes the same day as the latest court filing.

“Tribes, states and federal agencies are rightfully proud of their progress,” said BPA Administrator Steve Wright. “This program spans four states and involves hundreds of millions of dollars a year. Given that scale, it’s a challenge to keep the program on track while spending countless hours managing litigation. We’re all anxious to concentrate wholly on our work for fish in the rivers and streams where it counts most.”

To view the report, go to

http://www.salmonrecovery.gov/Biologi ... OpImplementation2008.aspx