

Treaty Tribes release the State of Our Watersheds Report

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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Ongoing damage and destruction of salmon habitat is resulting in the steady decline of salmon populations across western Washington, leading to the failure of salmon recovery and threatening tribal treaty rights, according to a report released today by the treaty Indian tribes. The tribes created the State of Our Watersheds report to gauge progress toward salmon recovery and guide future habitat restoration and protection efforts. It tracks key indicators of salmon habitat quality and quantity over time from the upper reaches to the marine shorelines of 20 watersheds in western Washington. The report confirms that we are losing salmon habitat faster than it can be restored, and that this trend shows no sign of improvement. "Indian people have always lived throughout the watersheds of western Washington. We know these places better than anyone else because they are our homes," said Billy Frank Jr., a Nisqually tribal member and chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. "This State of Our Watersheds report clearly shows that we must reverse the loss and damage of habitat if the salmon, our cultures and our treaty-reserved rights are going to survive." [You can browse and download the entire or section of the report here.](#)

The report includes data gathered over decades of tribal, state and federal efforts to provide a view of watersheds across western Washington, as well as recommendations for protecting those watersheds and the salmon they produce.

Key findings include: A 75 percent loss of salt marsh habitat in the Stillaguamish River watershed is believed to be a main factor in limiting chinook populations in the river system. Since the 1970s, the status of herring stocks in the Port Gamble Klallam Tribe's area of concern has dropped from healthy to depressed because of degraded nearshore habitat. Herring are an important food source for salmon. In the Chehalis River system, the Quinault Indian Nation estimates that culverts slow or block salmon from reaching more than 1,500 miles of habitat. Since 1980 the number of exempt permit wells in the Skagit and Samish watersheds alone has exploded from about 1,080 to 7,232. Property owners not served by a community water system are allowed a water right permit exemption to pump up to 5,000 gallons of groundwater per day. This makes less water available for lakes, streams and wetlands, and can harm salmon at all stages of their life. The report also documents: Increasing armoring of freshwater and marine shorelines by levees, dikes, bulkheads, docks and other structures that harm natural functions and reduce or eliminate salmon habitat. Disappearing forest cover in our watersheds — especially along rivers and streams — that is not being replaced. Forest cover helps keep stream temperatures low and reduces bank erosion. A huge network of unpaved forest roads, especially those crossing streams, which contribute to sedimentation that can smother and kill incubating salmon eggs. Ongoing salmon habitat degradation on agricultural lands because of tree removal, diking and polluted runoff. Despite massive harvest reductions, strategic use of hatcheries and a huge financial investment in habitat restoration efforts over the past 40 years, the State of Our Watersheds report shows that we are failing to turn the tide on salmon recovery. This fact is borne out by an assessment of the Puget Sound Chinook Recovery Plan developed by the state and tribal salmon co-managers and adopted

by the National Marine Fisheries Service. The 2010 assessment declared that while protecting existing habitat is the most important action needed in the short term, salmon habitat continues to be degraded and better habitat protection efforts are needed. The assessment acknowledges that responsible harvest management is doing its share to support salmon recovery, and that salmon populations in many watersheds would not improve even if harvest was completely eliminated. Yet while harvest is held accountable for salmon recovery, habitat loss and degradation continue every day throughout every watershed in western Washington, destroying the salmon resource and along with it, the cultures, communities and treaty-reserved fishing rights of the tribes in western Washington. "That salmon is us. All of us," Frank said. "Whatever happens to that salmon is going to happen to us. If we can't protect the salmon and its habitat, we can't protect ourselves from the same things that are driving the salmon toward extinction." The State of our Watersheds report can be viewed online or is available on CD through the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission Web site at www.nwifc.org/sow. The report is a living document that will be updated as new data become available. The State of Our Watersheds report is part of the Treaty Rights at Risk initiative created by the treaty tribes in 2011 to address the erosion of tribal treaty-reserved fishing rights from the ongoing loss of salmon and their habitat. The initiative is a call to action for the federal government to fulfill its trust responsibility to the tribes and its duty to recover salmon by leading a more coordinated salmon recovery effort. More information is available at www.treatyrightsatrisk.org.