Washington State signs agreement with federal action agencies

Local News

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OLYMPIA, Wash. -- Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire strengthened the state’s salmon-protection partnership with federal agencies Wednesday by signing a major agreement that will accelerate habitat protection and restoration in the Columbia River estuary.

The agreement between Washington and three agencies – the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bonneville Power Administration and Bureau of Reclamation -- provides an additional $40.5 million for habitat restoration actions throughout the estuary. The pact reinforces the federal commitment behind a biological opinion for the operation of Columbia and Snake River hydroelectric dams, enhanced and endorsed by the Obama administration on Tuesday.

“The Columbia River estuary plays a critical role for the health of our Columbia River salmon. I am very pleased to join hands with our federal partners to strengthen our efforts to protect and restore habitat for these fish,” said Gregoire who celebrated the 10th anniversary of the Washington Salmon Recovery Act in 2008.

The additional funds boost estuary habitat efforts to unprecedented levels, providing extra assurance that fish survival will improve.

“This agreement strengthens the already far-reaching federal commitment to improve ESA-listed fish stocks. The extra funding reinforces our commitment to protect and restore critical fish habitat and will work in concert with the estuary actions already laid out in the Biological Opinion,” said Brig. Gen. William E. Rapp, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Northwestern Division Commander.

“Estuary habitat improvements benefit all anadromous species in the Columbia Basin with a particular emphasis on those that are listed as threatened or endangered,” said Steve Wright, BPA administrator. “This agreement displays that our commitment in Judge Redden's courtroom is backed up by actions and money.”

Young salmon use the estuary as a nursery as they migrate downriver but are not yet ready to enter the ocean and provides the fish both forage and shelter from predators.

Estuary projects may include acquiring, protecting and restoring habitat; restoring tidal wetlands and reopening floodplains by removing dikes or installing tide gates; removing invasive plants and weeds; and restoring native vegetation. These improvements also benefit other fish and wildlife including smelt, sea-run cutthroat trout, Pacific lamprey, sturgeon, eagles and other raptors and waterfowl.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife will sponsor or coordinate the projects funded under the MOA, coordinating with the Lower Columbia Fish Recovery Board, the Lower Columbia River Estuary Partnership and other partners. All projects will carry clear biological benefits for ESA-listed fish, to support improvements in fish survival.

The new MOA uses BPA funding to leverage additional federal funding through a Corps cost-sharing program for estuary habitat.

Responsible for the operation of the Columbia River Federal Power System, the action agencies work with tribes and states to improve fishery habitat affected by the dams. The construction of dams altered the timing and magnitude of spring flows that salmon were originally adapted to. Other historic changes in the estuary, such as diking and draining of tidal wetlands, cut off listed salmon and steelhead from critical habitat

For more information, visit www.salmonrecovery.gov.