

Guest Viewpoint

Protect our strongholds of salmon

By John Kitzhaber and William Ruckelshaus

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The recent collapse of California's Chinook salmon stocks effectively has shut down the salmon fisheries in Oregon and California, and once again has many of us scratching our heads wondering what to do.

Ongoing efforts to recover wild stocks listed as threatened or endangered are vital, but alone won't ensure that our grandchildren will experience this magnificent species. In fact, beyond the Sacramento run, other salmon stocks from central California, Oregon and British Columbia have suffered steep declines.

So what now?

To date, we've focused on the important work of repairing damaged river systems. While we must fix what's wrong, it's also vital to maintain the long-term integrity and productivity of our healthiest wild salmon rivers — known as salmon strongholds.

These core centers of wild salmon abundance and diversity generate the highest percentage of wild salmon so essential to our ecosystems, economies and culture. For example, in the lower 48, roughly half of our wild salmon live in approximately 20 percent of existing salmon habitat.

These strongholds include the wild Illinois River in Southern Oregon and the Trinity River in Northern California, which account for approximately 30 percent of Chinook in the region. Additionally, such Northwestern Oregon coastal rivers as the Nehalem, Wilson and Salmonberry provide significant numbers of healthy wild salmon and steelhead.

In Washington, the Olympic Peninsula's coastal rivers produce more than half of the state's sockeye and steelhead, and 40 percent of its Chinook. The Skagit accounts for approximately 30 percent of Washington's Coho.

In Alaska — a stronghold accounting for more than a third of all Pacific wild salmon — Bristol Bay rivers are home to more than 60 percent of all wild sockeye and support one of North America's largest Chinook runs.

Together, these rivers and others will form a network across the North Pacific that will sustain wild salmon into the future.

The good news is that voluntary, incentive-based efforts are under way in most of these places to keep these rivers healthy and increase local economic opportunities. But since saving salmon ecosystems requires coordination across entire watersheds, these efforts desperately need federal and state support.

Congressional leaders from the Northwest, California and Alaska have taken note of these partnerships. A “salmon stronghold” bill would complement the Endangered Species Act by promoting the protection and restoration of our healthiest wild salmon rivers. The bill would leverage private dollars to support top-priority conservation acts; streamline incentive-based programs; and more effectively coordinate federal agency actions.

Communities in wild salmon strongholds could choose to join the program, which will respect private property rights and provide critical funding to acquire easements and riparian lands, improve fish passage and reward fish-friendly land management practices.

Building a network of salmon strongholds will buffer against future wild salmon collapses while gaining time for restoration efforts to succeed. The network also will help protect the critical ecosystem services necessary to mitigate climate change impacts, including clean water, carbon sequestration and fish habitat.

Wild Pacific salmon have proven remarkably resilient to natural calamities, surviving an ice age, volcanic eruptions and large-scale ecosystem changes. Climate change presents new challenges.

But by protecting the best remaining salmon ecosystems throughout their range, wild salmon not only can survive but thrive for generations to come.

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