

New strategy targets abundant salmon runs

By Associated Press



PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) - As it rushes through Oregon's southwest corner, the Illinois River is far removed from the bigger, tamer Columbia up north.

It is famous for its rapids and has no dams, fish hatcheries or urban development. For much of its 75-mile run, it's surrounded by towering mountains

Wild fish such as winter steelhead, coho salmon and chinook love it.

It's also at the heart of a new strategy that turns conventional salmon recovery upside down. Instead of focusing on the weakest runs and rivers - the federal Endangered Species Act approach - it focuses on rivers where wild salmon runs are relatively robust.

Backed by former Gov. John Kitzhaber, the Portland-based Wild Salmon Center is helping push a "salmon stronghold" concept to complement the Endangered Species Act. The center wants Congress to create a multimillion-dollar fund to help the Pacific Coast's strongest wild salmon rivers brace for the future.

Guido Rahr, Wild Salmon's president, said he doesn't want Congress to yank money from efforts on heavily dammed rivers or write off weak wild fish runs. But in the long run, banking solely on the Endangered Species Act, which protects such stocks, is "a losing strategy," he said.

Meanwhile developers are buying ranches and timberlands, making habitat protection tougher. Wild fish numbers are down in some of the Northwest' powerhouse rivers.

"It's like we've got a stock portfolio and all our money is in the most expensive, riskiest stocks," Rahr said. "Some of us think the next 10 years might be our last chance to save healthy salmon rivers."

The Illinois River is one of nine strongholds in Oregon and Washington that the new North American Salmon Stronghold Partnership has endorsed, which requires a request from local residents. The partnership is drawing on rankings of wild fish potential by government scientists and the Wild Salmon Center.

The Illinois hits the Rogue River 15 miles east of Gold Beach, supplying nearly a third of the Rogue's wild chinook and coho and about 10 percent of its wild steelhead, the Wild Salmon Center estimates. The Rogue generates 15 percent of Oregon's wild chinook and steelhead, according to center estimates.

But the number of fish, even on the Illinois and Rogue, are at best a quarter of the population before European settlement years ago. Logging, road building and thousands of fish-blocking culverts cut across public lands.

Kevin O'Brien, head of the Illinois Valley Soil and Water Conservation District, works with private landowners to improve streams. By all accounts, his group is making great strides. But O'Brien's success stories illustrate the challenges.

On Sucker Creek, a key Illinois tributary, a gold miner plans to relocate the stream and dig deep into the riverbed. O'Brien is working with him on a fish-friendly restoration.

On Deer Creek, another key Illinois feeder stream, a cattle rancher waters her pasture from the stream under a 150-year-old water right. But it dries up in the summer, stranding young fish. At O'Brien's urging, she's agreed to shift her withdrawals and participate in habitat restoration.

Landowner participation is voluntary. Funding is patchwork. Hundreds of projects are pending.

Last year, the Forest Service put logs into Sucker Creek to create pools for fish. A year later, tiny juvenile coho are swimming in the pools.

Each project is "a drop in the bucket," concedes Ian Reid, a Forest Service fisheries biologist in the basin. "People say the salmon problems were death by a thousand cuts. The recovery is going to have to be life by a thousand cuts."

Still, almost a third of about 1,400 distinct wild salmon and steelhead runs that return from the ocean to Northwest rivers have disappeared since the early 1800s.

In the Columbia-Snake system, 51 percent of the runs are extinct. Nearly half the Northwest's sockeye salmon runs are gone. More than half the wild chinook stocks that mature more in streams than the ocean have vanished.

Alaska, British Columbia and eastern Russia, not included in the study, have millions of wild salmon, far more than the Northwest.

Last year, Congress set aside \$31 million for Oregon and Washington salmon recovery, down from \$51 million in 2002. The two states tacked on more.

The Bonneville Power Administration, manager of hydropower dams in the Columbia and Snake, spent \$165 million on habitat improvements and fish-related dam operations.

But few rivers have a deep-pockets agency to pay for improvements. Oregon and Washington spread discretionary recovery money among river basins, diluting the impact. The Endangered Species Act directs big money to the most troubled systems.

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