

FISHERIES: Salmon stronghold bill swims upstream

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House and Senate bills to overhaul the federal strategy for Pacific salmon conservation have bipartisan support and backing from the Obama administration, but it remains unclear whether the bills will become law before time runs out on the 111th Congress.

Previous salmon conservation programs have focused on the most endangered spawning streams, but bills in the House (H.R. 2055 and Senate (S. 817) would direct federal, state, local and private stakeholders to develop conservation plans that make new investments in the healthiest runs (E&E Daily, April 13).

The Obama administration yesterday testified in favor of the "salmon stronghold" approach and is preparing testimony that formally supports the Senate bill, a National Marine Fisheries Service spokesman said.

"Conservation is most successful when proactive actions are directed at protecting populations before they decline and protecting ecosystems before they are degraded," Gordon Reeves, a research fish biologist for the Forest Service, told a Senate Commerce subcommittee.

Nearly 30 percent of the West's estimated 1,400 native salmon and trout populations have been lost, and a third of the remaining populations are listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act, Reeves said.

The species' struggles have hurt the Pacific salmon fishery, which has been closed in California and Oregon each of the past two years after record low numbers of salmon returned from the ocean to spawn.

Hoping to avoid similar declines, Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) introduced her legislation and got support from seven West Coast co-sponsors, including Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska). The House bill, put forward last year by Rep. Mike Thompson (D-Calif.) has 42, including Alaska Republican Don Young.

The House bill was given favorable reviews by a Natural Resources Committee panel last June. The Senate bill hit no resistance at yesterday's hearing, when witnesses from an environmental group, a commercial fishing group and Washington state's fish and wildlife agency all expressed support for salmon strongholds.

Continued efforts to revive collapsed runs is important, but for salmon populations to fully recover, new investments need to be made to enhance the healthiest streams, said Guido Rahr, president of the Oregon-based Wild Salmon Center. "If we get this piece wrong -- if we don't protect the strongholds -- we won't have healthy salmon runs in 30 or 40 years," Rahr said.

Despite the support, both bills remain in committee, and their backers are offering more optimism than assurances.

The Commerce Committee has not scheduled a markup to move the Senate bill, said Cantwell spokesman John Diamond. "There's hope, but we don't have a definite timetable yet," he said.

Thompson, sponsor of the House measure, is also "hopeful" his bill could pass this session.

A Natural Resources Committee spokesman said no markup had been scheduled.