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**Expanding net of protection for salmon**

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**By DEVONA ENSMENGER**

GUEST COLUMNIST

In May, Puget Sound steelhead was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. With the addition of the listing, half of Washington's salmon species are at risk of extinction. Despite the troubling trend, we have reason to hope. Some of the strongest wild salmon runs in the state can still be protected and thus avoid the fate that befell Puget Sound steelhead. Our last best salmon runs can win the race against decline and extinction, but only if we invest early in their conservation.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is taking a leadership role in this regard. This spring, Fish and Wildlife formally recognized the North Pacific Coast Lead Entity, a volunteer group representing the exceptional watersheds that drain the West Olympic Peninsula. The recognition of this new group expands protection for wild salmon habitat and helps to fend off or mitigate the types of threats that led to decline of Puget Sound steelhead.

The West Olympic Peninsula offers an oasis of clear, cold rivers and lush rainforests. With the Hoh and Quillayute as prime examples, those freshwater ecosystems are considered by many as the state's most important remaining strongholds for wild salmon and steelhead. This newest Lead Entity will help channel money to habitat restoration and protection in those watersheds, benefiting native fish in 10 rivers, four lakes and many small coastal streams.

If we are going to sustain wild salmon and their river ecosystems on the West Olympic Peninsula, we will need to make strategic investments in habitat protection. The Lead Entity has the local expertise and commitment to make a significant difference, but what the region really needs is a reliable infusion of funding to have a lasting impact. The alternative could be a reactive, litigious and expensive response that neither salmon nor society can afford.

While salmon on the Peninsula's coast may face fewer threats than other populations across the state, even those mostly pristine rivers are not out of danger. Many wild salmon runs in coastal rivers and streams are just 10 to 35 percent of their historical size, and a number of those runs continue to decline. If things go unchanged, more species will need legal protection, and the chances of their long-term survival grow dim.

Our coastal rivers and salmon species are at a disadvantage for recovery dollars because they compete with species elsewhere in the state that are in worse shape. We spend millions when salmon become endangered, but not nearly enough to prevent their decline in the first place. By taking good care of our healthiest salmon ecosystems, we can protect an irreplaceable resource and reduce the likelihood of expensive regulatory intervention.

Salmon and steelhead are adaptive fish that can overcome significant changes in their environment. If large shifts in climate play out as predicted, however, they will need more than highly evolved survival skills. They will need high-quality habitat that offers them refuge. We can help by investing more heavily in our most resilient salmon rivers, such as those on the West Olympic Peninsula. If we are successful, we will have created an insurance policy against extinction and wild salmon will thrive in perpetuity. If not, we likely will see more salmon and steelhead runs become imperiled while the window of opportunity closes.

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