

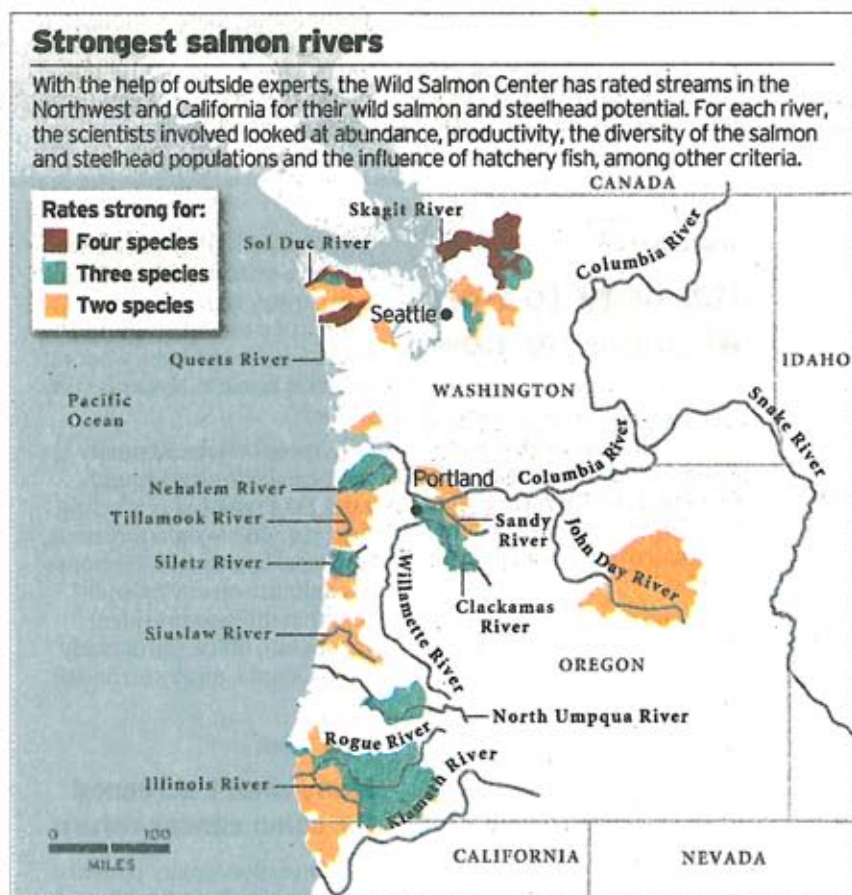
## Salmon plan favors the strongest

The Wild Salmon Center hopes to invest more in preserving healthy streams



ROB FINCH/THE OREGONIAN

Erica Stock of the Wild Salmon Center and Kevin O'Brien, coordinator of the Illinois Valley Watershed Council, raft down the Rogue River. The two groups hope to work together on projects in the Rogue Valley, one of the "fast, best" places where the salmon center contends wild fish are most likely to thrive.



Sources: Wild Salmon Center; North American Salmon Stronghold Partnership ERIC BAKER/THE OREGONIAN

By SCOTT LEARN  
THE OREGONIAN

Rushing through Oregon's southwest corner, the Illinois River couldn't be further removed from the Columbia, its bigger and tamer brother up north. The Illinois, famous for its rapids, has no dams, fish hatcheries or urban development. For much of its 75-mile run, it's surrounded by towering mountains that foster floods and discourage development.

It's a spot where wild fish such as winter steelhead, coho salmon and chinook thrive.

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 the heavily dammed Columbia and Snake 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.

The region's human population is surging. Developers are buying ranches and timberlands, making habitat protection tougher. Wild fish numbers are down in some of the Northwest's powerhouse rivers.

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## Salmon: Strongholds take effort from locals

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"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."

### On the Illinois

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.

On a tour, it's easy to see why the Illinois is high on the list of the strongest basins. About four-fifths of the land is public, held by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. Mature forests hug its banks, keeping water cool for fish. The deep forests give water — and young fish — a place to go when the winter rains arrive.

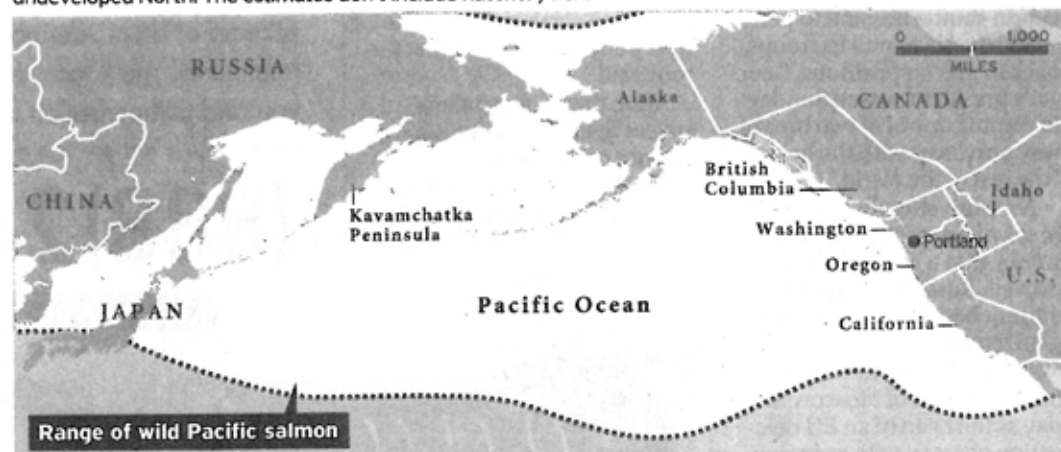
The Illinois hits the Rogue River 15 miles east of Gold Beach, supplying nearly a third of the Rogue's wild chinook and coho and about 10 percent of its wild steelhead, the Wild Salmon Center estimates. The Rogue generates 15 percent of Oregon's wild chinook and steelhead, according to center estimates,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

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. Much of the basin's low-lying tributaries, key for spawning and rearing of young fish, are in private hands.

Kevin O'Brien, head of the Illinois Valley Soil and Water Conservation District, works with private landowners to improve streams. By all accounts, his

### Where the wild salmon are

These wild salmon and steelhead estimates were compiled by the Portland-based Wild Salmon Center, which works throughout the Pacific on wild fish restoration. In general, the largest populations are in the relatively undeveloped North. The estimates don't include hatchery fish.



Region	Chinook	Coho	Steelhead	Sockeye	Total
Alaska*	1,178,000	8,598,000	n/a**	72,581,000	82,357,000
British Columbia	978,000	3,160,000	120,000	14,387,000	18,645,000
Russia*	359,000	2,165,000	86,000	2,769,000	5,379,000
Washington	436,000	707,000	49,000	96,000	1,288,000
California	395,000	10,000	93,000	0	498,000
Oregon	211,000	134,000	124,000	0	469,000
Idaho	14,000	0	23,000	0	37,000
Japan*	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total North Pacific</b>	<b>3,571,000</b>	<b>14,774,000</b>	<b>495,000</b>	<b>89,833,000</b>	<b>108,673,000</b>

\* Russia, Japan and Alaska have large populations of chum and pink salmon, not listed here.  
\*\* Wild steelhead data was not available for Alaska's relatively limited runs.  
Source: Wild Salmon Center

ERIC BAKER/THE OREGONIAN

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. The to-do list for the watershed council and federal agencies includes hundreds of projects.

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



ROB FINCH/THE OREGONIAN

A juvenile coho swims in a cool-water pool at Sucker Creek, a key tributary of the wild-running Illinois River in southwestern Oregon. The pool was created when U.S. Forest Service fish biologists placed logs in the water, part of an effort to try to restore a complex, natural stream bed that better suits cold-water loving salmon and steelhead.

a thousand cuts. The recovery is going to have to be life by a thousand cuts."

### 51% of runs are extinct

Northwest salmon's prospects are better than in most of Europe and along the Atlantic Coast, where thriving runs have

dwindled to remnants.

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 European settlers arrived in the early 1800s, National Marine Fisheries Service researchers estimated

last year.

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.

The fewest extinctions were in Washington's relatively unscathed Olympic Peninsula — just 3 percent of the stocks — followed by less-exploited coastal rivers along Oregon and Washington, such as the Illinois and Rogue.

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

In the Northwest and California, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lists 28 of 52 salmon and steelhead stocks as threatened or endangered, including coho coastwide.

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 hydropow-

er dams in the Columbia and Snake, spent \$165 million on habitat improvements and fish-related dam operations.

But few rivers have a deep-pocketed 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.

Three years ago, Robert Lackey, an Oregon State University professor and fisheries biologist at the EPA's Corvallis lab, helped recruit 33 salmon experts to write "Salmon 2100: The Future of Wild Pacific Salmon."

The book began with a bang: Its editors, including Lackey, predicted that Oregon, Washington and Idaho's human population would increase from about 12 million today to 65 million by 2100 if the growth of the past 50 years persists.

To meet that challenge, some favored the stronghold approach along with protecting weak runs. Others suggested writing off weak runs, saying taxpayers would veto an all-out approach. Some advocated boosting

hatcheries. Others favored breaching Snake River dams and restoring fish in cold Cascade streams best positioned to survive global warming.

"They all concluded that the current trajectory is to remnant runs of wild fish by 2100," Lackey said, "unless something dramatically different is done."

### Strongholds are voluntary

The stronghold concept is one of the dramatic changes fighting for prominence. To win money from Congress, advocates will have to sell lawmakers on spending more money for a recovery effort that already has cost billions.

The stronghold partnership's leaders emphasize that being a stronghold is voluntary and up to local residents. That helps explain why powerhouse river basins such as the Tillamook haven't signed up yet. They're mum on touchy issues such as reducing fishing or hatchery releases.

And they aren't seeking the \$270 million a year that Rahr, the Wild Salmon Center's president, once estimated would be needed for Northwest salmon

sanctuaries. The draft bill suggests \$30 million, with less to start.

Jay Nicholas, 59, runs the stronghold partnership. Nicholas has been a fisheries scientist for three decades. He wants to spend the rest of his career focusing on rivers "that still have a decent heartbeat."

With his long hair, graying beard and encyclopedic knowledge, Nicholas has the air of a salmon seer. He's written a children's book about salmon, illustrated with his watercolors. He's an avid fly fisherman.

The Northwest has focused on salmon recovery since 1991, when the first run was listed under the Endangered Species Act. Set that against 150 years of exploiting salmon streams, Nicholas said, and spending more money looks more reasonable.

Northwest wild salmon probably will never return to historical peaks. But with smarter recovery efforts, he said, "they don't have to go away here."

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