

The Oregonian

Thinking long term on salmon recovery

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By Martin Goebel and Michael Sutton

Most people -- from seafood lovers to fishermen -- are using one word to describe this year's nearly nonexistent salmon fishing season on the West Coast: disaster.

Typically, that word triggers the prospect of millions of dollars in federal aid to commercial fishermen and businesses. In 2006, the last year we experienced a salmon disaster, the government provided \$60 million to fishermen sidelined by closures. This year, fishing interests are rightly asking for even more and will probably get it. Next year's season promises to be no better.

A boom-and-bust cycle has played havoc with the West Coast's \$290 million salmon industry. But helping idled fishermen with massive federal largesse -- no matter how justified -- treats only the symptoms of a complex problem.

Dams have rendered salmon spawning habitat inaccessible to the fish and hampered downstream migration of juveniles. Water diversions for agriculture and other human uses have robbed salmon of vital in-stream flows. Poor land-use practices have ruined what few natural spawning grounds remain. Hatcheries, built to mitigate the loss of spawning habitat, have degraded the genetics of remaining wild stocks. And global climate change threatens to alter the fundamental conditions that salmon and many other species, including humans, need to survive.

Rather than simply treating annual salmon disasters by repeatedly returning to the federal till, we should consider spending what's necessary to fix the underlying problems. The good news -- if there is any this year -- is that treating the disease is feasible.

Several initiatives under way could help salmon recover from their downward spiral, if only we had the foresight to support them.

First, we must save our remaining rivers that are undammed and relatively pristine, such as California's Smith River and Oregon's John Day. The North American Salmon Stronghold Partnership is a promising initiative that would do just that. Another is the proposed Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, hammered out among Oregon,

California, federal and tribal governments, and dozens of other stakeholders. Removing old dams from the Klamath and other rivers in the region is probably the single most important thing we could do to recover our salmon.

In the upper Klamath Basin, ranchers, irrigators, tribes and conservationists are working out how to manage water differently and restore spawning habitat.

In California, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force has suggested new ways to manage an increasingly short supply of fresh water without shortchanging salmon and other fish.

These promising approaches deserve support from all sides, along with sufficient funding to make a difference. Continuing to treat the latest crisis rather than the underlying problems might be cheaper and more politically feasible in the short run, but in the long run it will prove penny wise and pound foolish.

Our salmon and the human and natural communities they support deserve better.

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