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COMMENTARY

The state of Pacific salmon? Not so wild

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by Pete Rand

It is undeniable that salmon are much less abundant in the Pacific Northwest compared to what the region supported prior to European contact. Another undeniable fact is that we spend an enormous amount of public dollars on salmon recovery -- much more than any other endangered species -- to limited effect. Much of this has to do with lost and degraded habitat, ocean conditions and climate, but there's more to the story.

Today's public perception is that we can benefit -- and in some cases recover -- wild salmon through hatcheries. From our earliest school years we're exposed to the notion of hatcheries as a tool for rebuilding salmon populations. But a growing body of scientific evidence suggests they may have the opposite effect. This apparent paradox is the subject of an international State of the Salmon conference starting today in Portland.

This year, 5 billion hatchery salmon will be released into the North Pacific. One out of every four returning adults will be of hatchery origin. Hatchery salmon can feed on or outcompete their wild counterparts, and they can elevate disease risk in waters they share with wild salmon. In addition, wild and hatchery salmon mix in coastal waters and are captured together in coastal fisheries, which can lead to wild salmon declines. While there are clearly regional economic benefits from runs of hatchery fish, it's becoming increasingly important that we consider the true costs.

Hundreds of government officials, scientists, businesspeople and nonprofit leaders spanning the entire range of Pacific salmon -- the Pacific Northwest, Canada, Alaska, Russia and Japan -- recognize there's a problem, and that's why they're gathering in Portland. The goal is to re-examine the region's relationship with hatcheries and develop fresh approaches that encourage the growth of wild salmon.

A growing number of new policy alternatives potentially are on the table, including: establishing protection for wild salmon to ensure against further loss of local populations; controlling the amount of hatchery fish that stray into streams supporting wild salmon;

and encouraging fishing practices that reduce the take of wild salmon while selectively targeting hatchery fish. In certain cases, these approaches might require scaling back hatchery releases in the future or committing to experimental approaches to rigorously test our assumptions.

The challenges facing the region are daunting. In the lower 48 states, Pacific salmon recovery plans need to fully account for the true economic, environmental and social costs of hatchery fish. In Alaska, half of the salmon fishery now consists of hatchery fish, and there's interest within the fishing industry to further expand hatchery production. In Russia, there are federal plans to greatly expand hatchery production in the western Pacific region. Hatchery development in Japan remains a cautionary tale, where hatchery salmon currently dominate and relatively few wild salmon persist.

Without action, the story of wild Pacific salmon will remain the same: Spending on hatcheries is up, wild fish are down and there is no clear end in sight. These are outcomes we can no longer afford.

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