



Endangered Species Act Alert 2006-2

RE: Listing of Oregon Coast Coho Not Warranted
DATE: January 19, 2006

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has announced that it believes that the Oregon coast evolutionarily significant unit (ESU) of coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*) is not warranted for listing as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) (71 Federal Register 3033, January 19, 2006). In making the determination NMFS relied heavily on the conclusions of an assessment of coast coho conducted by the state of Oregon and protection and conservation measures contained in the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds.

This decision is the conclusion of an ongoing status review of coast coho and other salmonid species since the 2001 *Alsea Valley* court decision invalidated a listing of coast coho as threatened because NMFS had not properly considered hatchery fish as part of the ESU. In June 2004 NMFS proposed listing coast coho as threatened and since that time the status review has gone through public and scientific debate.

The immediate effect of the decision to not list the Oregon coast ESU is that coho found in all Oregon coastal streams north of the Sixes River do not receive the protections of the ESA. However given the decision's reliance on the Oregon Plan it could have much larger implications for salmonid conservation in the region. The assessment of coast coho by Oregon is the first time that the Oregon Plan has been applied on a population (ESU) level and could serve as the model for additional efforts with other populations. NMFS reliance on the Oregon Plan reflects growing support for local planning efforts such as the local salmon recovery planning efforts in Washington State.

In relying on the assessment by Oregon and the conservation measures of the Oregon plan, NMFS went against the recommendations of the Biological Review Team (BRT), a group of scientist from several federal agencies, which had recommended that coast coho be listed as threatened. The BRT believed that coho populations were not stable enough to mitigate against considerable uncertainty in environmental factors such as fluctuating ocean conditions. The Oregon assessment, with which NMFS agreed, believed that conservation involving hatcheries, harvest and habitat had stabilized the population despite historically low population numbers and that such stability offset the uncertain conditions.

Another important aspect of this decision is that hatchery-produced fish, not just fish produced in nature, are included in the ESU. In most instances, this increases the size of the population considered as part of the ESU. This can have significant effects on listing and de-listing decisions by NMFS. For instance, in the recent NMFS decision regarding upper Columbia River steelhead, this population was down-listed from endangered to threatened status, at least in part because hatchery-produced fish were now considered part of the population. The addition of hatchery fish to other listed populations could result in down-listing and/or quicker recovery of populations leading to delisting.

A court challenge to the NMFS decision is very likely so it may be some time before the implications of this decision are fully realized.

Additional Resources:

For more information on the NMFS decision including the Federal Register language -

<http://www.nwr.noaa.gov/ESA-Salmon-Listings/Salmon-Populations/Alsea-Response/Alsea-OCC.cfm>

For more information on the Oregon Plan and assessment - <http://www.oregon-plan.org/>

Need More Information?

If you have questions or comments about this ESA Alert, please contact Jesse Halsted, ESA Policy Analyst (jhalsted@parametrix.com), or John Marsh (jmarsh@parametrix.com), Director of ESA Program.

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