INDEPENDENT MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE TEAM (IMST)

February 15, 2000

Mr. Jim Greer, Director
Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife
2501 SW First Avenue
Portland, OR 97207

Dear Jim,

I write to you on behalf of the IMST because ODFW represents the State of Oregon in the PFMC, and because the IMST is to provide scientific peer review of state agency programs relative to salmon recovery under the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds. The IMST is concerned about any salmon management options for the year 2000 that are not consistent with the recovery of wild coho salmon stocks. We see no evidence of rebuilding or recovery of OCN coho salmon stocks. The numbers of OCN recruits have decreased from over 200,000 in the 1970s to lows of about 15,000 in recent years.

We believe that incidental fishery impacts on OCN coho salmon should be minimized in 2000. The principal reason for this recommendation is the current status of these stocks. The number of OCN spawners surveyed in 1997 was the lowest since 1990. These spawners were the parents of the adult recruits of 2000. Thus we expect few recruits will be produced from that brood year, reducing the potential for significant recovery. The flood events of 1997 and 1998 may also decrease the recruits from the 1997 brood year.

During the past three consecutive brood years, OCN (river component) coho salmon (1996, 1997, and 1998) recruits have failed to replace spawners. These are the only brood years that have failed to replace themselves since 1970. Thus OCN stocks demonstrate a serious decline in recent years. Moreover, many local populations of OCN coho are at critically low levels along the Oregon Coast and in the Lower Columbia River (several hundred or less). These low numbers increase the risk of local extirpation.

Other considerations that argue for minimizing impacts to OCN stocks are:

1. Models for predicting abundance of OCN coho are imprecise. OCN coho abundances were overestimated in 1997, 1998 and 1999. Such overestimates are of special concern at current low levels of abundance because of the risk of local extirpation.

2. Estimates of hook-and-release mortality of unmarked coho salmon vary widely, and the assumed mortality rates from ocean fisheries may be underestimated. The impacts of increased mortality rates on OCN stocks, even if low, have uncertain risks with respect to achieving recovery.

State of Oregon

In view of the above considerations, we recommend that ODFW and PFMC maximize spawner escapement and abundance in the adult recruits of 2000. Improved spawner escapement is a prerequisite for a rapid recovery if ocean conditions continue to improve. Where ODFW participates in fishery management decisions, we recommend that the Department minimize impacts to OCN stocks by not recommending a selective fishery in the ocean for coho salmon during the year 2000.

Sincerely yours,

Logan A. Norris, Chair
Independent Multidisciplinary Science Team

LAN:grs

cc: John A. Kitzhaber, Governor
Brady Adams, Senate President
Lynn Snodgrass, Speaker of the House
Joint Legislative Committee on Stream Restoration and Species Recovery
Roy Hemmingway, Manager, Oregon Plan
Roy Elicher, ODFW
Don McIsaac, PFMC
IMST