

Numerous West Coast salmon stocks have suffered, and continue to suffer, from an onslaught of nonfishing activities that severely reduce natural survival by such actions as the elimination or degradation of freshwater spawning and rearing habitat. The consequence of this man-caused, habitat-based variation is two fold. First, these habitat changes increase large scale variations in stock productivity and associated stock abundances, which in turn complicate the overall determination of MSY and the specific assessment of whether a stock is producing at or below that level. Secondly, as the productivity of the freshwater habitat is diminished, the benefit of further reductions in fishing mortality to improve stock abundance decreases. Clearly, the failure of several stocks managed under this FMP to produce at an historic or consistent MSY level has little to do with current fishing impacts and often cannot be rectified with the cessation of all fishing.

To address the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act to clearly identify when a stock may be approaching an overfished condition or is overfished, the Council has established two separate criteria based on a stock's failure to meet its conservation objective. These criteria are denoted as a "conservation alert" and an "overfishing concern". The criteria for these two categories are based on the unique life history of salmon and the large variations in annual stock abundance due to numerous environmental variables. They also take into account the uncertainty and imprecision surrounding many estimates of MSY, fishery impacts, and spawner escapements. In recognition of the unique salmon life history, the criteria differ somewhat from the general guidance in the National Standard Guidelines (§ 600.310), but equal or exceed them in addressing the overfishing issue as it relates to salmon.

3.2.2 Conservation Alert

"A fishery shall be classified as approaching a condition of being overfished if, based on trends in fishing effort, fishery resource size, and other appropriate factors, the Secretary estimates that the fishery will become overfished within two years."

Magnuson-Stevens Act, § 304(e)(1)

To anticipate and react to potential stock declines which might lead to overfishing, the Council has established a conservation alert process with criteria and actions as described below.

3.2.2.1 Criteria

A conservation alert is triggered during the annual preseason process (Chapter 9) if a natural stock or stock complex, listed in Table 3-1, is projected to fall short of its conservation objective (MSY, MSY proxy, MSP, or floor in the case of some harvest rate objectives [e.g., 35,000 natural Klamath River fall chinook spawners]). While a projected one-year shortfall may be of little biological concern, it may also represent the beginning of production problems and is worthy of note to help prevent future stock decline.

3.2.2.2 Council Action

For all natural stocks which meet the conservation alert criteria, the Council will notify pertinent fishery and habitat managers, advising that the stock may be temporarily depressed or approaching an overfishing concern (depending on its recent conservation status), and request that state and tribal fishery managers identify the probable causes, if known. If the stock in question has not met its conservation objective in the previous two years, the Council will request the pertinent state and tribal managers to do a formal assessment of the primary factors leading to the shortfalls and report their conclusions and recommendations to the Council no later than the March meeting prior to the next salmon season.

The Council will take the following actions for stocks which trigger a conservation alert that do not qualify as exceptions under Section 3.2.4 (see Table 3-1):

1. Close salmon fisheries within Council jurisdiction that impact the stock.
2. In the case of Washington coastal and Puget Sound salmon stocks and fisheries managed under U.S. District Court orders, the Council may allow fisheries which meet annual spawner targets developed through relevant U.S. v. Washington, Hoh v. Baldrige, and subsequent U.S. District Court ordered