

HABITAT COMMITTEE REPORT ON CURRENT HABITAT ISSUES

Draft Long-Term Plan for Protecting Late Summer Adult Salmon in the Lower Klamath River

The Habitat Committee (HC) discussed prevention of fish kills in the lower Klamath River, and the Bureau of Reclamation's plans for flow augmentation in 2015. The HC also discussed development of a long-term plan and associated Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Current information shows the adult fall Chinook projected run size and hydrologic criteria which trigger additional flows may not be met this summer but it is difficult to forecast conditions through fall, given the extraordinary drought conditions. There is potential for an outbreak of ich (Ichthyophthirius) in 2015, and this demands continued monitoring.

The HC recommends the Council send a letter to the Department of Interior (DOI) in June regarding protection of Klamath adult Chinook salmon. The letter would recognize DOI's efforts to develop a long-term plan, express concerns about current year water conditions, and urge the DOI to use all authorities to release water as needed to avoid a fish kill this year. The letter would also express the Council's interest in participating in the EIS for the "Draft Long-Term Plan for Protecting Late Summer Adult Salmon in the Lower Klamath River," and ask that DOI take into account the Council schedule when setting comment periods.

State Water Reports

Washington

To date, three areas in Washington State (the Olympic Peninsula, ports of Central Washington, and the Walla Walla river watershed) have received a drought declaration. In these areas, essential fish habitat for Chinook, coho, and pink and habitat for Endangered Species Act-listed steelhead and chum salmon populations could be affected. The drought declaration has triggered management and regulations from water rights to in-stream work to flow plans with power/water utilities.

Idaho

Across Idaho, declining snowpacks throughout March have left Idaho without a single basin that is at or above 100 percent of median snowpack, although several basins in the Upper Snake are at approximately 90 percent. Across Idaho almost half of basins have 50 percent or less of median snowpack. These basins tend to be lower elevation watersheds in the southern and western portion of the state, as well as many of the Panhandle basins. Snowmelt that helps to push salmon and steelhead smolts will be less than average and come almost exclusively from higher elevations.

Oregon

In Oregon, statewide precipitation is near normal for the current water year (Oct. 1 to Sept. 30), in the range of 85 to 95 percent of average, primarily as rain. However, snowpack is at record low levels. As of April 1, snowpack ranges between 6 and 33 percent of normal, with most basins

under 10 percent of average. The northeast corner of the state has the highest snow pack at 33 percent of normal. Low snow pack will be a concern for stream flows later in the summer and for reservoirs that rely on spring melt. Streams that rely on snowmelt for base flows will see very low flows this year, which will in turn limit water withdrawals for irrigation and in-stream flows for fish.

Governor Kate Brown has made emergency drought declarations in five counties (Klamath, Harney, Malheur, Lake, & Crook Counties), and four additional counties are expected. The primary impact is on agriculture, and in some counties also livestock and wildlife resources.

California

Extreme drought conditions persist in California due to a lack of rain and snowfall for four straight years. Recent rain and snowfall are not expected to change the current drought forecast. This year's drought is on track to be one of the worst in the state's recorded history. The most recent snowpack survey shows that statewide, the snowpack's water content is just 5 percent of average for April 1, breaking the previous record of 25 percent in 1977 and 1991. On April 1, 2015, Governor Brown announced actions that will save water, increase enforcement to prevent wasteful water use, streamline the state's drought response and invest in new technologies that will make California more drought resilient. The Governor has directed the State Water Resources Control Board to implement mandatory water reductions in cities and towns across California to reduce water usage by 25 percent.

Rose Canyon Fisheries Project

Don Kent, President of Hubbs-Sea World Research Institute and CEO of Rose Canyon Fisheries, provided an informational presentation to the HC on the Rose Canyon Aquaculture proposal, which proposes to raise yellowtail jack, striped bass and white seabass in floating enclosures. The current proposal would establish the first offshore finfish aquaculture operation in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. The facility would be located about 4.5 miles offshore in the California Bight. At the sea surface, it could occupy up to an estimated 0.09 square miles (0.24 square kilometers), while the anchoring system would encompass up to 3.41 square miles (8.64 square kilometers) of the sea floor, which is purportedly coarse sand. Specific impacts (e.g., effects to groundfish essential fish habitat) have not yet been evaluated. Topics discussed by the HC included occurrence and treatment of disease, impacts of feed, displacement of fishing effort, and marine mammal management (e.g., if the pen becomes an attractant).

The proposal is subject to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other Federal and state processes, during which time a more detailed analysis of environmental impacts will occur. The timeline for this process is currently unknown. Eric Wilkins from CDFW is on the recently created Rose Canyon Interagency Workgroup and can continue to update the HC on the status and timeline of the project.

Eelgrass Beds and Aquaculture Expansion

Korie Schaeffer (NMFS) discussed two proposed expansions of aquaculture in eelgrass beds in the Humboldt Bay estuary. As eelgrass and estuaries are habitat areas of particular concern (HAPCs) for salmon and groundfish, and these expansions collectively comprise over 20 percent of eelgrass in Humboldt Bay, they warrant the attention of the Council. The projects are proposed by Humboldt Bay Harbor District (HBHD), affecting about 550 acres, and Coast Seafoods

(affecting 980 acres), primarily for culture of oysters and clams. NMFS' California Eelgrass Mitigation Policy recommends no net loss of eelgrass function but HBHD has currently not dealt with mitigation, while Coast Seafoods proposes a culture system that would not directly destroy eelgrass and in the proponent's view would result in no net loss. The timelines for these two projects differ. HBHD is finalizing the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) process and comments are closed, although there is still opportunity for additional comment during NEPA review. Coast Seafoods is on a longer timeline, and multiple opportunities for comment are possible. Environmental review for both projects may benefit from the input of the Council independent of their different stages of review. Though the public comment period is no longer officially open, the HC recommends that the Council send a letter to the HBHD in June supporting the comments of California Department of Fish and Wildlife and NMFS and emphasizing Council concerns for estuaries and eelgrass as HAPCS.

Action Items:

- Potential letter to Dept. of the Interior on Klamath salmon
- Potential letter to Humboldt Bay Harbor District on aquaculture

PFMC
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