

For Immediate Release - March 13, 2017

Conservation organizations send notice of intent to sue to the Army Corps of Engineers Regarding ESA Impacts of Hatchery Summer Steelhead Program

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Who: Willamette Riverkeeper and The Conservation Angler

What: 60-day notice of intent to sue under the ESA to the US Army Corps of Engineers

Why: Hatchery summer steelhead, not native to the Willamette River System, are causing declines and preventing recovery of wild winter steelhead.

Willamette Riverkeeper and The Conservation Angler notified the US Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps) that they are in violation of the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) due to the impacts that out-of-basin hatchery summer steelhead are having on ESA-listed wild winter steelhead. Wild winter steelhead are listed as threatened under the ESA, and hatchery summer steelhead stocked for a sport fishery are contributing to winter steelhead decline.

Hatchery summer steelhead are not native to the Willamette Basin. Using mitigation funding the Corps is required to spend to make up for the damages caused by the construction of more than a dozen dams, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) began producing hatchery summer steelhead from the Washougal River in Washington to mitigate for the decline of wild winter steelhead. However, the mitigation of spring chinook is based on native fish, not imported non-native fish. New information shows that hatchery summer steelhead program, enabled by the Corps, is detrimental to the winter steelhead.

“Incredibly, they began stocking a hatchery fish that was never present in the Willamette, to make up for the dam’s impact on native winter steelhead,” said Travis Williams, Riverkeeper & Executive Director of Willamette Riverkeeper.

David Moskowitz of The Conservation Angler asserted, “The hatchery fish may return at different times, but they overlap during spawning and the hatchery-wild pairs do not produce successful offspring so it wastes the productivity of the wild fish.”

Bill Bakke, Director of Science and Conservation for The Conservation Angler stated, “Some hatchery summer steelhead smolt remain resident and prey on juvenile wild steelhead and spring chinook and they compete for food and rearing space, reducing the overall productivity of wild juveniles during rearing and outmigration. And when they do return as adults, they interfere with the spawning success of wild winter steelhead. This has an impact on recovery of threatened winter steelhead.” said Bakke.

Studies by state and federal biologists identify harmful impacts from hatchery summer steelhead on research shows the impacts on threatened wild winter steelhead. The goal of the 60-day notice is to engage NOAA Fisheries in reinitiating consultation with the Corps on the impact of out-of-basin hatchery summer steelhead on ESA-listed wild winter steelhead.