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Carp Anyone? Salmon recovery faces even more obstacles.

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Carp Anyone?

Salmon recovery faces even more obstacles.

By Valerie Brown



The middle fork of the Willamette River once had many braided channels.

In September 1900, the Oregonian reported that a 30-inch carp estimated to weigh 25 pounds had been stunned by explosives detonated during construction of a gas main across the Willamette River in Portland. The carp was thrown under a wharf to rot. The paper concluded that "there is but little probability of the carp coming into general use until

after the salmon, shad, sturgeon and other species of edible fish have been exterminated."

A century after this revealingly callous remark, we may need to revisit the carp. The estimated 300,000 wild Chinook salmon that once plunged annually across Willamette Falls at Oregon City to spawn in the upper reaches of the Willamette River Basin have been reduced to about 1,000 individuals, 600 of which return to the McKenzie River.

Salmon's anadromous life cycle, which requires them to adapt to both freshwater and ocean habitats, also complicates recovery strategies. At least half of Willamette salmon's spawning and rearing areas are blocked by dams on forks and tributaries. In the valley, the river once

flowed through meandering braids and wetlands, offering young fish refuge from predators, and cooling the water. Today, salmon must traverse a radically transformed Columbia estuary to swim through a single channel past plumes of toxic effluent and a hundred cities that are home to 2.3 million people.

In March 1999, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) listed Upper Willamette spring Chinook as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The listing means nobody -- not governments, businesses, or individuals -- may harass, trap, or kill the listed species. These actions are called "takes" and include destruction of habitat essential to salmon survival. Thus, the listing triggered a flurry of navel-contemplating in the tangle of governmental entities and industry and citizen groups that shape Oregon environmental policy.

The ESA's 4(d) rules are the NMFS enforcement tool for threatened species. The final rules for Willamette Chinook take effect Jan. 8. After that the NMFS can penalize violators, but the federal agency is starting out with a collaborative approach. Local governments may submit proposed compliance programs to the NMFS for approval. Such plans may allow some take provided the governmental body can demonstrate "best management practices" for long-term recovery. Gov. John Kitzhaber's Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds, created to avoid compulsory actions by the NMFS through voluntary changes by governments and citizens, has given birth to the Willamette Restoration Strategy (WRS), through which the welter of stakeholders has been struggling to develop a statewide set of standards and guidelines that everyone can follow and be confident of ESA compliance. The WRS will be submitted to the governor in February.

The actions of individuals contribute at least as much to salmon distress as those of large industries, agricultural operations and businesses such as real estate development. Individuals pouring automotive oil into a storm drain, paving a driveway or cutting trees and shrubs along streams are taking salmon because these actions harm essential habitat. However, the 4(d) consequences to individuals are even more benign than those for governments and industry, although many property owners will encounter changes in development regulations, particularly within the river's floodplain. Fines and other penalties "would be a last resort," says Neil Bjorklund, a natural resources planner for the city of Eugene.

This mild enforcement approach is frustrating to environmentalists who see non-point source pollution by individuals as a serious problem for recovery plans. "Nobody is stepping up the way they should," says Nina Bell, executive director of Oregon Environmental Advocates. "Regulation of stormwater runoff is very much in its infancy."

The city of Eugene is reviewing all its practices and regulations in light of the 4(d) rules and expects to come up with its assessment early this year, according to Bjorklund. An intergovernmental group is also working to coordinate Eugene, Springfield and Lane County responses.

The geographic area encompassed by these three governments contains mostly resting and rearing habitat, but Bjorklund says, "It's important for people to remember that just because we don't have spawning grounds in Eugene, [the salmon] still need to be safe." The local areas of most concern are the main channel through town and the upstream watersheds. More than half of Eugene, including the west Eugene wetlands, drains through Amazon Creek, the Long Tom River and the Fern Ridge Reservoir, an area historically so marshy that it has never been salmon habitat.

Like the braided channels of the river's past, future policies are likely to shift in response to political, economic and demographic pressures. For the time being there is relative amity among the stakeholders. "During the proposed rules there was a lot of finger-pointing," says Rosemary Furfey of the NMFS, "but that has really changed now."

It's uncertain how effective current efforts will be. The WRS looks good on paper, but it has no legal authority. And although NMFS fisheries biologist Steve Stone says so far the agency doesn't "have any marching orders that things are different," President-elect Bush can be expected to enforce the ESA more lightly than would a Democratic administration.

One encouraging sign emerges from an informal survey conducted by the WRS last summer at the Oregon State Fair. About 80 percent of respondents said housing and businesses should be kept out of the river's floodplain, and nearly 40 percent were in favor of dam breaching to give salmon access to their original spawning areas. But until people are willing to consider radical changes in their individual and collective behaviors, it will be unclear whether the political will exists to do the right thing for the fish. Just in case, we may want to start adapting our salmon recipes for carp.

Websites of Interest:

www.nwr.noaa.gov (National Marine Fisheries Service NW Regional Office)

www.dfw.state.or.us (Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife)

www.salmonrecovery.gov (Federal Caucus)