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Salmon plan set to go to the feds

BY PHILLIP THOMAS-SMITH

An effort to find public consensus on a plan to improve survival prospects for salmon in Puget Sound has reached an important milestone, and that could be good for farmers as well as fish.

Now, Shared Strategies, a Seattle-based organization working to develop a salmon recovery plan with broad support, is preparing for its next step — presenting a proposal to the federal government.

A draft report was presented last week at a "salmon summit" at the Tacoma Dome, drawing about 500 community leaders, scientists and lawmakers from around the sound.

The draft regional recovery plan will be submitted to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service this June. By working with all groups with a stake in the issue, Shared Strategies is hoping to produce a fish plan backed by farmers, tribes, and the general public.

Farm and fish interests have conflicted since chinook salmon were listed on the Endangered Species List in 1999, the report said. Bull trout and summer chum salmon are also listed.

Nowhere has that conflict been more heated than in the Skagit Valley, where tribal fishing rights backed by federal agencies have collided at times with the interests of farmers, who have fought requirements to create wide buffer zones between the river and cultivated land. The Shared Strategies draft report says, "farming which is done in an environmentally sensitive manner is a good neighbor for fish."

The document recognizes the economic challenges faced by most farmers and proposes that recommendations be developed for local governments to reduce or remove "fiscally based impediments" for agriculture.

The plan proposes that the state give more funding and technical assistance to farmers who participate in conservation activities.

Steve Sakuma, a third-generation farmer in the Skagit Valley, said that things are different from when his generation first began to farm. In order to survive, farmers have had to change the way they do business, he said.

Sakuma said he has "vertically integrated" his farm, combining six different crops, processing and research on his land.

"Gone are the days where you could just farm," Sakuma said.

Farmers say their livelihoods are being threatened just like local salmon runs.

"I think farmers think they're on the endangered list," said Don Stewart of the American Farmland Trust. "They're facing awful global competition."

Stewart believes the Shared Strategies paper is "very positive."

Brian Cladoosby, chair of the Swinomish Tribe, began talking with Sakuma two years ago to try and come up with ways their two livelihoods — farming and fishing — could complement each other.

Their discussion has been joined by members of the fish and farm industries.

Shared Strategies asked Cladoosby and six farmers from different farm associations to sit down to talk about how the two industries could help each other.

Cladoosby says that the Shared Strategies plan is a step in the right direction.

"It's probably the first time (tribes) have sat down and tried to craft a solution for fish and farms," Cladoosby said.

He said the plan has many positive aspects, but he added that it is only a starting point.

"In my mind, I think it's a cookie-cutter right now," Cladoosby said. "It covers all the farmland and it talks about rewarding all the farmers, even those that aren't good stewards of the land that might be harming fish. What do we do with farmers that hurt salmon?"