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Biggest Recovery Ever? 'Shared Strategy' for Salmon OK'd

The recovery effort is designed to bring Puget Sound chinook back to healthy levels.

**By Christopher Dunagan, cdunagan@kitsapsun.com
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The "shared strategy" to save Puget Sound chinook salmon from extinction was formally approved by the federal government Friday.

The overall recovery plan for salmon was compiled from separate proposals drafted by various Puget Sound counties and cities. The document — more than 5,000 pages, including appendices — is the largest and most comprehensive recovery plan ever approved by the federal government, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service, which oversees the Endangered Species Act.

"This is a plan built on local salmon-recovery efforts and remarkable cooperation among state, tribal and local governments and others," said Bob Lohn, regional director for the fisheries service.

Kitsap County, which is undergoing a review of its shorelines buffers, will use its Critical Areas Ordinance to protect salmon through land-use restrictions and ongoing shoreline restoration projects. Sections of the East Kitsap plan deal with hatcheries and harvests and identify "information gaps" about local conditions.

Kitsap County has no designated chinook streams, except for the headwaters of the Union, Tahuya and Dewatto rivers. Nevertheless, the federal government has designated Kitsap's entire shoreline as "critical habitat," because nearshore areas provide migration corridors and resting and feeding areas for chinook spawned elsewhere.

The county has begun a two-year inventory of its shoreline to determine which areas need special protection. As a result of an appeal of its Critical Areas Ordinance, the county is going through public hearings to decide whether to adopt 150-foot buffers for most marine shorelines and lakes in the county.

The county also is a major player in identifying salmon-restoration projects that qualify for state and federal funding.

Coordination of the various county plans was accomplished by the nonprofit umbrella group called Shared Strategy for Puget Sound. Because of the importance of shorelines, the group included a 246-page shoreline analysis as part of the overall Puget Sound Chinook Recovery Plan.

Recovery plans under the Endangered Species Act normally are written by federal officials, Lohn noted, but he expects that locally produced plans will be more successful in saving salmon.

Approval of the recovery plan comes as Gov. Chris Gregoire pushes a major initiative to restore Puget Sound to healthy conditions by the year 2020. The governor has proposed a \$220 million, two-year spending package for Puget Sound, including \$54.7 million to clean up toxic pollution, \$37.4 million to restore damaged shorelines, \$25.3 million to reduce stormwater pollution, \$56.3 million to curtail septic pollution, \$40.7 million to protect essential habitats and \$5.8 million to create a "citizen partnership."

Rob Masonis of American Rivers, an environmental group, said he applauds the vision that went into the recovery plan, but it needs to be adequately funded, and government must be vigilant in carrying it out.

"While the plan is an excellent start," he said in a written statement, "there are gaps that need attention. The criteria for recovery are weak and leave too many salmon populations at too high a level of risk. The plan does not appear to ensure that rivers and streams will have adequate flows for salmon, and it also falls short on actions that will remove pollution from Puget Sound rivers and streams."

Biologists have identified 22 independent chinook populations remaining in Puget Sound. They believe at least 15 other groups have already gone extinct. The total number of individual chinook returning to Puget Sound rivers is estimated to be one-tenth of historical levels, and some runs are as low as 1 percent.

The recovery plan includes goals for the next decade, but recovery is targeted at 50 to 100 years.

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