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Salmon recovery effort a model of cooperation

Nothing represents the natural wonders of Puget Sound better than the salmon. The health of local fish runs, or the lack of it, indicates how successfully people here are coexisting with nature. Growth puts that delicate balance under constant pressure - the region is expected to add 1 million more people, roughly the population of metropolitan Portland, by 2020.

That pressure has taken a toll on salmon runs. Puget Sound chinook and other species were listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1999, a move that required local recovery plans to be developed. Failing to do so would inevitably lead to court rulings restricting development and economic growth.

But recovery plans are expensive, and often pit competing interests against each other. Happily, watershed groups throughout the greater Puget Sound region have managed to bring various interest groups together in serious recovery planning. And in an effort to coordinate recovery plans in 14 different watersheds, the nonprofit Shared Strategy for Puget Sound is providing a model for effective regional planning, compromise and environmental restoration.

Shared Strategy grew out of the desire of regional leaders to build on recovery efforts already underway in the watersheds. It is hosting a summit in Tacoma this week where some 400 representatives from various interests - including government, tribes, farmers, business and conservation groups - will work to finalize a regional recovery plan for chinook, bull trout and Hood Canal summer chum. A plan is to be submitted to the federal government this summer, with implementation expected to be approved by year's end.

Thousands of volunteers have been working for three years to get to this point. Never in the history of the Endangered Species Act has a community this large developed its own plan to save a listed species from extinction. Importantly, Shared Strategy's effort has been supported by the federal agencies that implement the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries.

A strong plan supported by local stakeholders and federal agencies should provide more than just good feelings - it could yield important federal grants, along with federal regulatory relief. It will provide developers with the certainty they need to move ahead with projects that provide jobs. It helps ensure that things like resource protection and property rights are both addressed successfully.

The efforts of these volunteers, and the willingness of divergent interest groups to work together on salmon recovery shows that we all value the quality of life this corner of the world offers. Protecting it takes all of us.

For more information, visit www.sharedsalmonstrategy.org.

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