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Summit wraps up vast plan to restore salmon

Diverse group of interests is set to deliver ideas to U.S.

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TACOMA -- Poised to unveil sweeping plans to rebuild Puget Sound salmon runs, representatives of builders, environmentalists, timber companies, tribes, farmers and local governments are girding this week for an onslaught of challenges.

Five years after headlines heralded Endangered Species Act protections for the Sound's struggling chinook salmon, the people of the region are about to tell federal authorities how they plan to bring the fish populations back to healthy levels.

But what looms ahead is daunting to many attending this week's regional "salmon summit" here: tight government budgets. Public apathy. Private property-rights crusaders and simmering resentment over salmon-protecting building regulations. Efforts to undercut the Endangered Species Act in Congress.

Still, the 500 or so people at the two-day meeting concluding today at the Greater Tacoma Convention & Trade Center expressed optimism because of the unusual way the salmon restoration plans have been developed -- by locals, rather than by federal officials.

Part pep rally, part seminar, part debate, the summit amounts to a giant strategy session -- held under banners that proclaim: "Creating a future for both salmon and people."

"We have tried from the beginning to see the recovery plan as our business, all of our business," conference organizer William Ruckelshaus, the first Environmental Protection Agency administrator, told the group in the keynote address. "We are asking you to leave your agendas at the door and go to work over the next two days to save people and fish."

Speaker after speaker emphasized the unusual nature of the region's "bottom-up" response to the federal government's designation of Puget Sound chinook as "threatened."

Across 14 watersheds in the Sound and the San Juan Islands, groups of people representing widely varied interests have spent the last three years hammering out plans to resurrect the salmon runs.

Drafts of those plans are being revised now and are expected to be presented to the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service in June.

Ruckelshaus and others emphasized that by taking on the task themselves, people here will come to think of the plans as theirs and will be more willing to pay money or endure land-use restrictions.

"We're in charge -- all of us who share the Puget Sound ecosystem," Ruckelshaus said.

The meeting was organized by a non-profit group called Shared Strategy for Puget Sound. The brainchild of Ruckelshaus, the group emphasizes its non-political, cooperative nature.

In the Lake Washington-Cedar River-Lake Sammamish region, a local group hopes that long hours of hashing out the recovery plans will defuse potential tensions, said Don Davidson, a Bellevue city councilman and a leader of the watershed group.

That watershed, which covers urban areas from Renton to Everett as well as rural stretches of eastern King County, is targeted under the plan for scores of changes.

They include:

- Removing bulkheads that harden shorelines of Lake Washington and Lake Sammamish.
- Creating no-construction buffers along waterways.
- Cutting back on water use.
- Replacing pavement with surfaces that allow water to soak into the ground, conserving water and reducing damage to streams.

That plan is coming out at the same time that regulations that make up King County's critical-areas ordinances are under fire in rural areas. There, residents angry about orders to leave half to two-thirds of their property undeveloped are planning legal challenges.

"Right now, tensions are pretty high," Todd Woosley of the Seattle King-County Association of Realtors told summit participants yesterday. "We need to enhance salmon habitat, but we also need to respect the needs of people."

But those kinds of growth-management measures are exactly the kind of political challenges to which the salmon-recovery effort will have to stand up, said Jim Kramer, executive director of the Shared Strategy group.

And the region also will have to start paying attention to broader concerns, such as the health of the Sound and the prevention of catastrophic oil spills, Kramer said.

"These efforts are hard," he said. "They are controversial."

And costly. Although roughly \$50 million a year has been spent on the region's salmon runs in recent years, that funding will have to double as the campaign intensifies in years to come, leaders of the effort figure.

They hope some money will come from the federal government, as in the past, but they wonder what the chances are for squeezing more out of a cash-strapped Congress.

"It's hideously expensive," said Seattle City Councilman Jim Compton, who is working on the recovery plans.

To persuade doubters, they like to point to the example being set in the Nisqually River watershed between Tacoma and Olympia.

There, the Nisqually Tribe has worked with others to produce a salmon-recovery plan. And the tribe itself already is seeing results from changes it made in 1999 to its fish-catching rules, said David Troutt, the tribe's natural resources director.

Before that, tribal officials had a loose goal of having 900 fish reproduce in the Nisqually each year, and they frequently didn't meet that goal, Troutt said.

Where just 400 fish spawned a decade ago, about 2,600 did last year. The difference?

The tribe reduced the number of fish diverted from the wild into its hatchery, and the number that Nisqually fishermen caught, and instead allowed more fish to spawn in the river. Combined with favorable ocean conditions, these moves are credited with helping the stock rebound.

The original Nisqually chinook stock has gone extinct, but the tribe is trying to rebuild a locally adapted stock from those it raises in its hatchery.

Gov. Christine Gregoire is expected to appear at the summit today and lend her support to the salmon-recovery effort.

Other protected fish that also are expected to benefit from the recovery efforts are Hood Canal summer-run chum and bull trout.

Across the state, recovery plans for salmon are coming out this year covering vast areas that drain into the Columbia and Snake rivers.

Kramer said that despite the formidable challenges, he is confident that Puget Sound-area residents can save the salmon runs. He pointed to the region's cleanup of Lake Washington's massive problems with pollution from sewage and other sources in the 1960s.

"This is a region that has done it before. Lake Washington was cleaned up by people who wanted their children to be able to swim in it," he said. "We have a history of doing these kinds of things, and this is the challenge of our time."

TO LEARN MORE

- Shared Strategy for Puget Sound is a non-profit group coordinating the regional salmon-recovery plans. Visit www.sharedsalmonstrategy.org or call 206-447-3336.
 - The draft recovery plan affecting the Cedar River, Lake Washington and Lake Sammamish (Water Resource Inventory Area 8) can be viewed at the Shared Strategy Web site. For more information, call 206-297-1907.
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