

Gregoire pushes Puget Sound plan

BY JOHN DODGE

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SEATTLE -- The Puget Sound salmon recovery plan should be used to kick-start a new initiative to clean and protect Puget Sound, Gov. Christine Gregoire told community leaders gathering here Thursday.

Despite 20 years of studies, plans and cleanup efforts, Puget Sound water quality and marine life keep declining, the governor noted.

She intends to convene a group to come up with a Puget Sound-wide action plan by this fall.

Gregoire asked Bill Ruckelshaus, the former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency head who helped guide the salmon recovery plan, to help with the Puget Sound action plan.

Ruckelshaus, who also is chairman of the state Salmon Recovery Funding Board, accepted the task but conceded he wasn't sure how it would proceed.

"We need a bold new plan to clean up Puget Sound, using the salmon plan as the foundation," the governor said.

Her remarks came as the nonprofit group called Shared Strategy, spearheaded by Ruckelshaus, Nisqually Indian leader Billy Frank Jr. and others handed over the Puget Sound chinook recovery plan to federal government officials.

The 10-year, \$1.2 billion plan crafted by citizens, government officials, scientists, tribes and others in each of Puget Sound's 14 watersheds is designed to double chinook populations, which are hovering around 10 percent of historic levels.

If it succeeds, chinook runs could be back to 80 percent of historical levels in 50 years, good enough to support fishing and remove the species from the federal Endangered Species Act list, where it landed in 1999.

It calls for major projects to restore lost habitat, curb pollution, alter hatchery operations and restrict salmon harvesting to allow native runs to rebound.

All this would have to happen in the face of population growth of 1.4 million people in Puget Sound in the next 15 years.

And the money called for is about twice what's been available for Puget Sound salmon work in recent years.

In Congress, the Senate has \$90 million set aside for Pacific Coast salmon recovery in the 2006 budget, but the House is sitting at \$50 million. Puget Sound would get a small slice of the funding pie.

Congressman Norm Dicks, D-Wash., said it's time Congress paid as much attention to Puget Sound as it has to the cleanup of Chesapeake Bay and the Great Lakes.

"Shared Strategy is doomed to failure if we don't protect Puget Sound and Hood Canal," Dicks said. "We've got to have a Puget Sound initiative."

Kathy Fletcher, director of the conservation group People for Puget Sound, said the governor's desire to ramp up action, political will and resources to repair the Puget Sound ecosystem is welcome news.

"It's the most encouraging thing we've heard in 20 years," Fletcher said. "For the first time in a long time, things are looking up."

The federal government is expected to publish the Puget Sound chinook recovery plan in the federal register for public review beginning in September. It could be adopted as early as December.

It is not a finished product, its authors and others agreed.

"The critical issue of stream flow is barely addressed in individual watershed plans, yet wild salmon and steelhead need sufficient water to survive," noted Rob Masonis, director of the American Rivers regional office.

And local governments must adopt stricter land-use laws to pull development back from the shores of Puget Sound and salmon-bearing rivers and streams, Masonis said.

"Land use needs to help recover salmon, not make the problem worse," said U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash.

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