

Region takes the reins of salmon recovery

THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Last updated: July 7th, 2005 02:40 AM (PDT)

Six years after the federal government declared Puget Sound salmon runs gravely ill, the region's communities now believe they have found the cure.

It's an elixir of their own making.

The recipe is spelled out in a 4,000-page plan submitted to the federal government last week by a coalition of regional policy-makers and interest groups.

It proposes to answer the 1999 listing of Puget Sound chinook salmon by retooling hatcheries and dams, protecting wetlands and flood plains and restoring feeding grounds.

Just as important as what it would do is how it came to be. The plan represents a role reversal that bodes well for its success.

Usually, the federal government writes the recovery plans that are required once a plant or animal is listed under the Endangered Species Act. Those plans have dismal track records, partly because federal law does not require that the plan actually be implemented.

But the biggest reason behind their failures has been the way the plans were developed: authored by federal scientists and delivered to local communities as a federal mandate.

In the late 1990s when the Puget Sound region saw the chinook listing coming, community and state leaders started talking about how to keep fish protections from running headlong into projected population growth.

They settled on a regional grassroots effort that Jim Kramer, the executive director of Shared Strategy, the nonprofit organization formed to coordinate the recovery plan, calls the "next stage of democracy." Rather than waiting for the federal government's marching orders, Puget Sound policy-makers and interest groups volunteered for the task of identifying barriers to fish recovery and assigning responsibility for removing them.

It's the kind of job that doesn't win any popularity contests. But in this case the plan — plans, actually, written by the people within 14 watersheds — has almost universal support.

Local governments, farmers, tribes, environmentalists and developers — groups that usually find themselves at opposite ends of salmon recovery debates — all say they see promise in the Puget Sound recovery plan. That's largely because they helped write it.

Puget Sound is not the only region to pursue such a collaborative effort. In April, the southwest corner of the state went first, submitting a plan for restoring wild salmon in the Lower Columbia River. But the Puget Sound plan is unprecedented in its scope, extending from the Canadian border to Mount Rainier and from the Cascade Mountains to Neah Bay.

The federal government now has to sign off on the plan, which is expected to happen after a public comment period this fall. Federal scientists provided the science that underlies the plan, and the Bush administration has repeatedly said that the future of salmon recovery lies in community-driven efforts.

Of course, the real test of any plan is whether it is put into practice. On that score, the Puget Sound plan — written for the region by the region — faces good odds. It's now up to the region to hold itself accountable.

Originally published: July 7th, 2005 12:01 AM (PDT)

