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Action to Protect Salmon Urged

Scientists say their advice was dropped from a report to the U. S. fisheries service.

By Kenneth R. Weiss
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Six leading marine scientists, who were hired as government advisors only to find their recommendations stripped from an official report, went public today with their views — that federal action is urgently needed to protect more than a dozen populations of West Coast salmon and steelhead trout from the threat of extinction.

The scientists published their recommendations in today's issue of the journal *Science* after their advice was dropped from a scientific review of salmon recovery methods commissioned by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

"We were trying to do an honest job and we were called radical environmentalists," said Ransom Myers, a fisheries biologist from Dalhousie University in Canada. "It was troubling to administrators we objected to the policy that habitat did not need to be protected. There was a clear implication if we continued to talk about policy, the group would be disbanded."

The group, both in its initial review and in *Science*, recommended that the agency rewrite its regulations to ensure the continuation of federal protections for salmon and steelhead in California, Oregon and Washington state in the wake of a federal court ruling that put those safeguards in jeopardy.

William Hogarth, director of the National Marine Fisheries Service, disputed the scientists' claims that their views were squelched. "We don't censor our scientists," Hogarth said. "They were simply asked to separate out the policy opinions and send them to [Northwest Regional Administrator] Bob Lohn or myself and not make it part of the scientific report, which is put on the website."

The report left intact the scientists' review of a variety of approaches to sustaining both wild and hatchery-raised salmon.

The dispute echoes similar complaints by other scientists working for the federal government, including

the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Recently, EPA staff members said that 21 months of research on mercury pollution from power plants was ignored in favor of industry recommendations that called for looser regulations of emissions. The wording of the regulation adopted by the EPA incorporated the exact language provided by a research and advocacy group that represents 20 power and transmission companies.

A group of 20 Nobel laureates and several science advisors to past Republican presidents last month wrote an open letter accusing the Bush administration of "suppressing, distorting or manipulating the work done by scientists" at various federal agencies.

"This administration has developed such a reputation for scientific censorship that it wouldn't be a surprise if this had been ordered removed from Washington," said Donald Kennedy, former president of Stanford University and now editor of *Science*.

Kennedy described the six scientists as top-notch and noted that their article easily withstood review by scientific peers before publication.

"Differences on scientific issues should be argued on the merits," Kennedy said, "and censorship isn't the way to conduct an honest debate."

The debate in this case involves the fate of 15 populations of salmon and steelhead trout that spend most of their lives in the ocean and then return to spawn in rivers and streams along the West Coast from Central California to the U.S.-Canada border.

All 15 of these distinct populations are sufficiently diminished to be listed as threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. However, the protected status of all 15 is now being challenged by developers, farmers, ranchers, timber interests and private property advocates who want to end restrictions on activities that the government says can harm streams that these fish use to spawn and raise their young.

For instance, the government forbids logging and tilling of soil in a buffer zone around streams and can limit water drawn from rivers for irrigation if it's needed for salmon to swim upstream.

The challenges to the restrictions were inspired by a 2001 federal court decision that ordered the removal of coho salmon in southern Oregon from the endangered species list. The reason, wrote U.S. District Judge Michael Hogan, was that salmon raised in hatcheries could be included in the count of wild fish because they are associated genetically and swim in the same river. And given that the hatchery produces the fish in abundance, the judge concluded there was no need for salmon in these rivers to be protected.

The fisheries service declined to appeal the ruling. Subsequently, fishing and environmental groups intervened, but lost their appeal last month when the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that an appeal was premature because of evolving policy.

Meanwhile, the fisheries service appointed six university scientists to review all efforts to help recover salmon populations. The panel was led by Robert Paine, an ecologist at the University of Washington, and included Myers, of Dalhousie University; Russell Lande of UC San Diego; William Murdock of UC Santa Barbara; Frances James of Florida State University; and Simon Levin of Princeton University.

Levin, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology, said the group quickly focused on the "ridiculous situation" in which federal protections of salmon and its spawning grounds are removed because the fish populations are being propped up by hatcheries.

"Just because you have captive breeding programs doesn't mean salmon are restored," Levin said. "If you have animals in the zoo, you don't call the natural populations restored."

Hatcheries have been trying for more than a century to restore salmon populations. However, this group of scientists cites evidence that hatchery-raised fish can do more harm than good.

When hatchery fish are first released, they are often larger than their wild cousins and can cannibalize them or out-compete them for food in rivers. Over time, the hatchery fish are much less likely to survive in the wild. They tend to feed near the surface, waiting for pellets of food to drop from the sky as they do in hatcheries, making them easy pickings for kingfishers and other birds.

Those that do survive often interbreed with wild fish and dilute the gene pool with altered behavior related to finding food, avoiding predators and finding their way home to spawn.

Moreover, maintaining the genetic diversity of wild stocks is key to ensuring salmon's survival in face of environmental and climatic changes, scientists say. Much like the stock market, a population that produces well one year can be a bust the next. It's best to hedge bets on a broad portfolio of different genetic stocks to ensure long-term success.

So the scientists, in their article, recommend that the fisheries service rewrite its rules and definitions to distinguish between wild salmon and hatchery-raised fish both to satisfy the legal concerns of the federal judge and to make sure wild salmon remain protected.

The fisheries service must find a legally defensible definition, the scientists wrote, or face "devastating consequences: Wild salmon could decline or go extinct while only hatchery fish persist."

Hogarth dismissed the scientists' recommendations, saying the agency is pursuing another approach by reworking its hatchery policy. He declined to explain what the new policy will do when it is released in coming months, but he acknowledged it may lead to removing at least some salmon stocks from the list of protected species. "To say how many, I don't know," he said.

The service faces a March 31 court deadline to decide whether to remove eight populations of salmon in Washington state from the list of endangered species because those rivers have an abundance of hatchery fish. Federal officials have requested a 90-day extension, not yet granted by the judge presiding in the case brought by the Building Industry Assn. of Washington.

Concerned about this deadline, the panel of scientists offered the fisheries service a draft of its report. At a subsequent meeting in Santa Cruz, the panel members said they were shown an e-mail from a fisheries service administrator stating he was not interested in the policy opinions of these "radical environmentalists," and ordering the first section about policy to be deleted.

"I was deeply offended," Paine said. "We were scientifically accurate. We were trying to be constructive."

Paine, like the other scientists, declined to name the administrator who wrote the e-mail.

The recommendations of the scientists were applauded by Glen Spain, northwest regional director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Assns.

"The Endangered Species Act was not intended to protect fish in tanks. It was intended to protect them in the wild," which includes the rivers and streams where they spawn, Spain said. "The fishing industry has suffered enormous loss due to over-logging, over-grazing, over-water and polluting the rivers."

Russ Brooks, a Pacific Legal Foundation attorney representing property owners and ranchers, said he doubted that the scientists' policy recommendations would be adopted by the fisheries service or would make much difference.

"The fisheries service really has a hot potato in its lap," Brooks said. "The fisheries service is going to try to please everyone and will not please anyone at all. I know the environmentalists are not going to be happy, and the people I represent will be unhappy. The only thing I feel confident in forecasting is more litigation."

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