



NATIVE FISH SOCIETY

Advancing the Recovery of Native, Wild Fish in Their Homewaters

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Victory for Wild Fish on the Sandy River

January 17, 2014 (Portland)— “It is undisputed that hatchery operations can pose a host of risks to wild fish...it is clear that the Sandy River Basin is of particular importance to the recovery of the four [Endangered Species Act] listed species and is an ecologically critical area” wrote federal Circuit Court Judge Ancer Haggerty in his ruling yesterday that the National Marine Fisheries Service violated the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policies Act when it approved the State of Oregon’s management of the Sandy River Hatchery.

Native Fish Society, an Oregon City-based conservation group working to recover self-sustaining populations of wild fish throughout the Northwest, along with Eugene-based McKenzie Fly Fishers, sued NMFS in a last ditch effort to prevent the extinction of Chinook, steelhead and coho in the Sandy River. The populations had declined to less than 1000 wild steelhead and coho and only 1300 wild spring Chinook. The State of Oregon had received NMFS’ blessing under the Endangered Species Act to continue to drown the river with over a million hatchery fish. The judge found fault with NMFS because it “treats the success of the [hatchery] programs as a given, an issue called into doubt by ODFW’s miserable track record of containing stray rates.”

“The science is irrefutable. The law is irrefutable. And, Judge Haggerty affirmed this. It is the most significant decision benefitting wild fish in Oregon in over a decade,” said Mike Moody, Executive Director of Native Fish Society after hearing the ruling. “Hatchery fish cause significant ecological and reproductive problems for wild fish. There is no evidence that hatcheries have been effective in the recovery of wild populations. In fact, the evidence shows they foster a slow march toward hatchery-induced extinction. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife cannot claim ignorance of this when some of the most significant studies were authored by past and current employees.”

Moody added, “The actions brought by Native Fish Society focus solely on the hatchery on the Sandy River. Its objective is the recovery of native, wild fish on the Sandy River. Native Fish Society is not trying to close down fishing of any kind, but rather to ensure recovery of wild fish.”

Bill Bakke, Director of Science and Conservation for Native Fish Society said, “As a grass roots advocacy organization, we see it as our responsibility to ensure that laws such as the Endangered Species Act are followed. We have spent the 17 years of this organization’s existence working with ODFW to restore wild fish runs to sustainable, harvestable levels in the Sandy River. Instead, our efforts were met with plummeting fish populations while ODFW and NMFS pumped out hatchery fish and papered over the problem. Someone had to step up and say we are not going to allow you to push these fish into extinction.”

The Native Fish Society and McKenzie Fly Fishers argued that NMFS should have analyzed a broad range of alternatives and prepared an Environmental Impact Statement under the National Environmental Policy Act. The groups also argued that the agency allowed too many hatchery fish to interbreed with the wild fish, and that weirs and acclimation ponds - man made structures in the river that were supposed to prevent the interbreeding – were not likely to succeed so NMFS was wrong to approve them under the Endangered Species Act. Judge Haggerty agreed.

“Today is a great day to be a wild fish in the Sandy River” said Bakke.

"As anglers and as citizens, we take the long term view that the top priority of fishery managers should be to preserve and enhance our native fish populations so they remain available to future generations. The science is clear that this goal won't be achieved using current hatchery practices. We are gratified that the court agreed that business as usual is not only unacceptable, but as we maintained, in this case violated the law," said Arlen Thomason, Conservation Chair for the McKenzie Flyfishers.

Native Fish Society and McKenzie Flyfishers are represented in this case by Portland lawyer Dave Becker and Pete Frost of the Western Environmental Law Center in Eugene.

NFS Fact Sheet

Native Fish Society launched the “Save Sandy Salmon” campaign in 2011 and asserts:

- Historically, runs of native fish in the Sandy River basin once ranged as high as 20,000 winter Steelhead, 10,000 spring Chinook, 15,000 Coho, and 10,000 fall Chinook.
- Today, the numbers of wild native fish in this system have declined precipitously. Wild winter steelhead average less than 970 spawners annually, wild spring Chinook now average less than 1,300, and wild Coho now average approximately 900. The runs of fish returning to the Sandy River basin are now dominated by artificially bred fish produced by the hatchery.
- Hatchery-bred fish cause significant ecological and reproductive problems for wild fish. Hatchery fish occupy habitat and compete for food needed for wild fish to survive and to spawn, they attract predators and prey on smaller wild fish (both of the same species and of other species), transmit diseases, and compete for spawning grounds.

- Also, when hatchery fish interbreed with wild fish it reduces the genetic fitness of the wild fish for generations afterwards. Steelhead born of hatchery parents in the wild might produce only one-eighth to one-third of the offspring that two breeding wild fish would produce.
- Programs at the Sandy hatchery are not conservation programs, but rather are harvest programs used to 1) mitigate loss of fishing and harvest opportunities due to loss of habitat and migration blockage resulting from the Columbia Basin hydropower system, and 2) augment fishing and harvest opportunities on the Sandy River.
- The goal of the hatchery program is to produce artificially bred fish that will contribute to commercial and sport fisheries in the Columbia River Basin and Sandy River. In no instance has a salmon hatchery restored a depressed wild population to the point where it is self-sustaining.

THE NATIVE FISH SOCIETY is a non-profit public interest organization with more than 700 members. Founded in 1995 by noted conservationist Bill Bakke, NFS is guided by the best available science to advocate for abundant wild, native fish and promote the stewardship of the habitats that sustain them. NFS staff, along with its more than 65 volunteer River Stewards, are working to recover wild steelhead and salmon on more than 75 rivers in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and northern California. NFS believes that no effort for wild fish protection and recovery is stronger or more effective than those initiated and sustained by local communities.