Frequently Asked Questions

Restoring Bull Trout to the Clackamas River

What action is being taken?

In early summer 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife are reintroducing a "nonessential experimental" population of threatened bull trout into the upper Clackamas River, where they were once widely distributed but have been extinct for nearly 50 years. The agencies also are working with the U.S. Forest Service (specifically the Mt. Hood National Forest) and the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation, which manage, along with ODFW, bull trout in the Metolius River, our source for donor stock for the project. Other partners are Portland General Electric, NOAA Fisheries, and the U.S. Geological Survey.

How many bull trout would be reintroduced?

This effort involves the direct transfer of multiple life stages of bull trout from a healthy population in the Metolius River to the Clackamas River. As part of our overall recovery strategy for bull trout, the goal of this project is to reestablish a self-sustaining population of 300-500 spawning adult bull trout within 20 years. We plan to transfer 30 adults, 30 sub-adults (generally age three or four but not yet reproductive age), and approximately 1,000 juveniles (age one to three years) annually at the onset of the project. Juvenile salmon and trout species have high mortality rates in their young life stages, so efforts to reestablish a new population require a high number of juvenile fish to ensure enough survive to reach reproductive age. The direct transfer of fry may be considered at a later date pending evaluation of the initial transfers.

The project is expected to include additional fish transfers annually for at least seven and possibly up to 15 years. The numbers and life stages of fish transferred annually will depend on the population size of the donor stock, the success of reintroduced fish over the initial years of the project, and any effect the reintroduction has on listed populations of coho salmon, Chinook salmon, and steelhead.

Why are bull trout being reintroduced?

Bull trout are listed as "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act, meaning they are considered in danger of reaching "endangered" status in the foreseeable future within all or a significant portion of their range (endangered status means the species is considered in danger of extinction within all or a significant portion of its range). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's goal with all listed species is to recover them to the point that they no longer need ESA protection. Reintroducing bull trout into the Clackamas would meet objectives of the recovery strategy for the species in the Willamette River Basin, inform consideration of other

potential bull trout reintroductions in the future, contribute the bull trout's rangewide recovery, and meet partner agencies' goals to restore native fish communities.

Why choose the Clackamas River for the reintroduction?

The Clackamas River was considered for reintroduction even before the bull trout was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, in years of discussion between the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service. The Clackamas also was identified as a core habitat area in the draft bull trout recovery plan completed in 2002. Although the last known Clackamas bull trout was documented in 1963, all of the factors believed to have caused their disappearance have been remedied. An interagency feasibility study completed in 2007 for this project suggests that a significant amount of suitable habitat for bull trout spawning and rearing exists in the upper river and its tributaries.

What is a "non-essential experimental" population?

This is a special classification under the Endangered Species Act. While it is illegal to deliberately "take" (kill or harm) any listed species, the less restrictive "non-essential experimental" classification, added to the ESA by Congress in 1982, is meant to provide flexibility in implementing recovery actions and improve public receptiveness to restoring ESA-listed species into areas they previously inhabited. This classification precludes anyone who accidentally kills or harms the listed species from being in violation of the law.

How can a "nonessential experimental" population contribute to recovery?

One of the biggest challenges to bull trout recovery rangewide stems from the fact that existing populations, though wide-ranging across five states, are small and isolated from each other. Restoring bull trout in areas like the Clackamas River can ultimately help connect these disparate populations and lead to a more stable, self-sustaining population overall. The continued existence of the rangewide bull trout population is not conditioned upon a newly restored one in the Clackamas, but it will support our overall recovery goals.

Will activities be prohibited because of the reintroduced population?

No—while it is illegal to deliberately "take" (kill or harm) any listed species, there are no additional prohibited activities from the "non-essential experimental" classification—that would go against the purpose of this classification in the Endangered Species Act, which is specifically to avoid restricting land management and recreational activities. Federal projects would not be altered or stopped to protect the reintroduced bull trout population. Throughout the entire non-essential experimental population area, no federal agency or its contractors will be in violation of the ESA for harming or killing bull trout as a result of any authorized agency action. Oregon's sportfishing regulations would apply just like any other area of the state, with no new regulations for the reintroduced bull trout population. Targeted angling for bull trout will continue to be prohibited for the time being (and anglers must continue to release any incidental bull trout catch), but both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and ODFW hope that a recovered bull trout population in the Clackamas River may allow new sportfishing

opportunities in the future. This also may be dependent upon the status of other bull trout populations throughout their range and the species' recovery progress overall.

Would the "nonessential experimental" classification be changed later?

It is not likely that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would change the "nonessential experimental" population classification in the future. If the species recovers and is removed from the endangered species list altogether, the "nonessential experimental" population classification would be eliminated as part of the delisting process. If any other changes appear to be necessary in the future, we would work with our partners and initiate another federal rule-making process under the National Environmental Policy Act (much like we did leading up to this reintroduction), which includes a robust public scoping and review process for proposed actions.

Would bull trout negatively affect listed salmon and steelhead in the Clackamas River?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considers it unlikely that reintroducing bull trout will have population level impacts to listed salmon and steelhead in the Clackamas River. To approach this project with the utmost care, the project includes three critical components to limit adverse effects to listed salmon and steelhead populations and reduce risk and uncertainty.

First, we have developed a robust monitoring program to determine whether we are meeting the project's goals and objectives, including limiting impacts to salmon and steelhead. Second, we will use information from monitoring for adaptive management, allowing us to continually apply new knowledge and science to these efforts and refine our approaches to ensure appropriate action as the project progresses. Third, the "non-essential experimental" classification for the bull trout population allows significant flexibility to manage the reintroduced population and address impacts to listed salmon and steelhead. The project includes contingency plans to ensure our efforts are modified, halted, or even reversed if impacts are greater than anticipated.

As an initial effort in developing project, the Service convened a panel of expert scientists in 2008 to assess potential bull trout effects on salmon and steelhead in the Clackamas River and to develop associated monitoring and management recommendations. The results of the panel informed our consultation with NOAA Fisheries, the agency with lead responsibility for listed coho and Chinook salmon and steelhead populations. Public comments during scoping meetings in 2008 and on project proposals in 2009 provided valuable input from other partners and citizens. All of these efforts culminated in the formal federal rulemaking allowing the project to proceed.

The reason recovery partners have approached this with the utmost care is that bull trout are considered "apex predators," meaning they will eat salmon and steelhead eggs, fry, and juveniles, as do other fish in the Clackamas River. They also will eat other fish that prey upon salmon and steelhead eggs, fry, and juveniles such as sculpin, whitefish, rainbow trout, cutthroat trout, brown trout, and brook trout. Predator/prey dynamics are complex and it is not

possible to predict with certainty the overall impact a reestablished bull trout population will have on today's salmon and steelhead populations in the Clackamas River.

Although there is uncertainty regarding impacts, it is informative that there are hundreds of watersheds in the western United States inhabited by bull trout, salmon, and steelhead, many of which are in Oregon, including the McKenzie, Middle Fork Willamette, Hood, Deschutes, John Day, and Imnaha rivers, and the Grand Ronde and its major tributaries including the Wenaha, Lostine, and Minam rivers. Although studies on interactions between bull trout, salmon, and steelhead are limited, there is no evidence that predation by bull trout is a limiting factor in the status of any Oregon populations of salmon and steelhead, nor has recovery planning for federally listed salmon and steelhead populations identified bull trout predation as a possible factor limiting recovery.

How will this project be monitored?

There are three main components of the monitoring program: 1) monitoring the donor stock to ensure we are not affecting its health and viability by removing individuals, 2) monitoring reintroduced fish to assess how well they're faring), and 3) monitoring impacts to salmon and steelhead.

Much of the monitoring of donor stock is currently occurring through annual counts of spawning adults, though we plan to augment this with genetic monitoring at appropriate intervals during the reintroduction effort. For reintroduced fish, monitoring will occur primarily by assessing movement, distribution, reproduction, presence and absence, survival, and relative abundance using Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tag technology, radio telemetry, snorkel observations, rotary screw traps, and minnow traps. We will pay special attention to tracking the movement and distribution of bull trout relative to areas within the Clackamas River where juvenile salmon and steelhead listed under the Endangered Species Act may be most vulnerable to predation, such as reservoir environments and fish passage facilities associated with Portland General Electric's Clackamas River Hydroelectric Project. In addition, once bull trout are reestablished in the Clackamas, we will replicate a baseline study of predator/prey interactions conducted in 2009 and 2010. This will help us assess any changes in predator/prey interactions, specifically between bull trout and listed salmon and steelhead.

In addition to all of the above, we intend to employ adaptive management practices, an approach to wildlife and habitat management arising out of the complexity of modern conservation challenges. In a nutshell, this means we will continually evaluate and refine our approaches as we gather new information throughout the lifespan of this effort.

Will bull trout leave the area where they are released?

Bull trout do tend to migrate within large river systems, and some of the reintroduced fish are expected to move out of the release area. To ensure that any reintroduced bull trout that may move are covered by the "nonessential experimental" population classification, the area's boundaries extend downstream from the release site to cover the entire length of the Clackamas River, and include the Willamette River downstream from Willamette Falls to where

it meets the Columbia River (including Multnomah Channel). It is expected that the majority of reintroduced fish and future offspring of these fish will remain within these boundaries. In the unlikely event that bull trout move outside of them, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could propose to extend the boundaries to include the entire range of the expanded population.

Have bull trout been reintroduced in other areas?

One other bull trout reintroduction effort has been underway since 1998. The ODFW and the U.S. Forest Service have been transferring bull trout from the McKenzie River to the Middle Fork Willamette River to rehabilitate a population thought to be close to extirpation in the late 1980s (this is not a non-essential experimental population, however). A revamped draft recovery plan for bull trout, to be completed within the next year, is expected to identify several other potential reintroduction sites throughout the bull trout's range. For example, in Oregon, recovery partners have identified the upper Deschutes and North Santiam rivers as potential sites for future reintroductions.