



## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

### **California Golden Trout Protection Not Warranted** *Questions and Answers*

Prepared by the Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office, August 2011



Photo Credit: Kevin Aceituno, USFWS

#### **Q: What is a California golden trout?**

A: California golden trout is a subspecies of rainbow trout. Formerly known as Volcano Creek golden trout, they are well known for their bright coloration, red to red-orange belly and cheeks, bright gold lower sides, a central lateral band that is red-orange, and a deep olive-green back. California golden trout can reach lengths of 7 to 8 inches.

California golden trout have been known to live as long as nine years, and they commonly reach six to seven years old. This is extremely old for stream-dwelling trout, and is likely due to the short growing season, high densities of fish, and a low abundance of food in these streams. These conditions create competition for scarce resources, promoting slow growth rates that lead to old ages of trout.

#### **Q: Where do they live?**

A: California golden trout inhabit the South Fork Kern River and Golden Trout Creek on the Kern Plateau in Tulare County, California. Both were once part of the same stream system, but became separated by volcanic activity in the region thousands of years ago. In Golden Trout Creek, the subspecies historically occurred from the headwaters, with the exception of headwater lakes, and the probable exception of upper reaches of some tributary streams, to a series of waterfalls where the creek joined with the Kern River. In the South Fork Kern River they historically occurred from the headwaters to the Domeland Wilderness.

#### **Q: What do they need to thrive?**

A: California golden trout require flowing water, adequate stream substrate, and a specific range of water temperatures to successfully reproduce (spawn). They are uniquely adapted to their harsh environment - females begin egg development for the

following season while simultaneously going through egg maturation for the present season. This allows females to prepare for spawning in the following year in the event that conditions are not favorable for egg maturation at that time. California golden trout reach sexual maturity when they are 3 to 4 years old.

**Q: Why were they considered for listing?**

A: Designated the official state fish in 1947, California golden trout have experienced population pressures for more than a century. They have been subjected to habitat degradation from grazing on numerous occasions since the 1800s; hybridization threats from introduced rainbow trout for at least 75 years, and predation and competition from brown trout since the 1940s. In 2000, Trout Unlimited petitioned the Service to list the subspecies based on those threats.

**Q. What did the petition cite as reasons that the trout should be listed?**

A. The petition alleged five threats to the California golden trout as justification for listing the subspecies.

1. It is threatened with hybridization and introgression with non-native rainbow trout.
2. Habitat loss and degradation due to livestock grazing, packstock, recreation, and poor land management by U.S. Forest Service threatens California golden trout.
3. Introduction of non-native brown trout has led to competition for scarce resources and to predation of California golden trout.
4. Inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms.
5. Whirling disease that could potentially be spread to the California golden trout if diseased hatchery trout fingerlings were to be stocked into headwaters lakes or into streams.

**Q. The California Golden trout is a subspecies. How does the Act address subspecies protections?**

A. Under the Act, the species definition also includes subspecies and distinct population segments and they are accorded the same protections under the Act.

**Q: What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's determination regarding the status of the California golden trout?**

A: After a thorough review of all available scientific and commercial information, the Service has determined that the California golden trout does not warrant listing under the Act. This determination is based primarily on a reduction in threats resulting from conservation actions conducted in accordance with a multi-agency conservation strategy for the California golden trout.

**Q. Why did the Service make this decision?**

A: Since the 90-Day Finding was published, numerous measures have been taken to address the potential threats that were identified in the petition. In 1999, the Service, California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) and U.S. Forest Service coordinated on an initial conservation strategy for the trout. In 2004, the Service signed a memorandum of agreement with CDFG and the Forest Service for implementation of the 2004 updated conservation assessment and strategy for California golden trout.

Since 2004, the agencies have coordinated to improve conditions for the California golden trout and its habitat, thereby reducing the threats to the subspecies. Through State and Federal agency work with local stakeholders (such as Orvis, Trout Unlimited, CalTrout, and Federation of Fly Fishers), numerous habitat restoration efforts have been completed and continue to be implemented in accordance with the Conservation Strategy.

Following are examples of conservation actions that have been initiated: (1) The Forest Service has “rested” grazing on two of the seven allotments to alleviate grazing pressures and promote restoration; (2) Fish barriers on the South Fork Kern River have been significantly improved, addressing predation and competition by brown trout and introgression issues by preventing movement of nonnative and hybrid trout; (3) introgressed trout have been removed from the headwater lakes of Golden Trout Creek, thus eliminating the source of introgression in the creek system; and (4) stocking of reproductively viable nonnative trout was curtailed within the California golden trout’s range in 2004.

Efforts are ongoing to remove and monitor brown trout populations in the South Fork Kern River. The University of California, Davis is currently completing a genetic management strategy, which is due to the Service by December 31, 2011.

**Q. What happens now?**

A. At this point, the Service will take no further action with regard to listing the California golden trout. However, with our partners the US Forest Service, CDFG, and others, we will continue carrying out the activities needed to restore the subspecies in accordance with the 2004 Conservation Strategy. The Service will accept additional information and comments from all concerned governmental agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested party concerning the status of this subspecies.

**More questions? Write or call:**

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