

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Coastal Cutthroat Trout Conservation Activities and Vision

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On July 5, 2002, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) withdrew the proposed rule to list the Southwestern Washington/Columbia River Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of coastal cutthroat trout (USFWS 2002). In the proposed rule withdrawal, the Service expressed concern that certain populations of coastal cutthroat trout are likely below historic levels and continue to decline, and discussed the need for more and better information to make effective management decisions. The Service agreed to "continue to provide technical assistance to Federal, State, and other entities and encourage them to address the conservation needs of the coastal cutthroat trout". The Service also committed to "work with these [Federal, State, and other] agencies and entities to collect additional biological information, monitor the status of coastal cutthroat trout, and monitor the progress of conservation efforts for the DPS." Additional support of these commitments is found in the Pacific Region: Fisheries Program Strategic Plan (2004-2008), specifically in Regional Objective 3.2: "Maintain healthy, diverse, self-sustaining populations of fish and other aquatic resources and assist in preventing listings under ESA [Endangered Species Act]".

To fulfill these commitments as well as establish a broad conservation vision for coastal cutthroat trout, the Service initiated an effort to develop a range-wide coastal cutthroat trout Conservation Strategy and a Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation (RME) program. Using a simple conservation strategy model, which emphasizes a range-wide RME program, specific conservation activities, and actions to evaluate population and habitat response to those RME and conservation actions, we contacted Federal and State agencies to facilitate and financially support Conservation Strategy and RME program development and implementation. In addition, the Service has been investigating basic life history characteristics of coastal cutthroat trout in an effort to better understand movement and habitat use of the subspecies for more effective monitoring and evaluation in the future. Examples include Service funded and supported research on lower Columbia River and Salmon River basin coastal cutthroat trout life history, migration, and habitat use. Finally, we secured

start-up funding and initiated planning for the 2005 Coastal Cutthroat Trout Symposium.

Our most notable conservation planning progress has been in Oregon, where the Service and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) have signed a Coastal Cutthroat Trout Memorandum of Understanding (ODFW MOU) to accomplish three products:

- (1) A cooperative coastal cutthroat trout RME program, implemented under the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds and ODFW's Native Fish Conservation Policy;
- (2) A coastal cutthroat trout conservation plan, developed via ODFW's Native Fish Conservation Policy; and
- (3) A Conservation Agreement between the Service and ODFW to specifically identify the RME and conservation actions and responsibilities necessary to conserve coastal cutthroat trout in Oregon.

Since the MOU was initially drafted in 2003, the Service has 1) met regularly with ODFW to discuss research and monitoring needs, 2) provided technical input on ODFW's North Coast coastal cutthroat trout harvest management proposal, 3) provided technical assistance and funding for the Salmon River coastal cutthroat trout research project, and 4) met with ODFW to discuss results of ODFW's internal coastal cutthroat trout research and monitoring needs workshop.

To generate additional interest in coastal cutthroat trout conservation, the Service has financially supported and provided leadership in planning and hosting the 2005 Coastal Cutthroat Trout Symposium. We hope the 2005 Symposium will supplement information originally developed in 1995, bring research and management personnel together, and invigorate multi-state research and management actions on key biological questions and conservation opportunities.

Key uncertainties continue to exist in our understanding of both the biology and status of coastal cutthroat trout populations throughout their range, and addressing these uncertainties would be a key objective of a range-wide coastal cutthroat trout conservation strategy. An RME effort to address these uncertainties is critical to effective management and conservation of coastal cutthroat trout, to

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address threats to the species, as well as to prevent future listing of the species. The following are several key uncertainties identified during the Service's coastal cutthroat trout listing process:

- Trends in population abundance, distribution, and age structure;
- Relative contribution and expression of resident and migratory strategies within a population, including above-barrier populations;
- Identification of Distinct Population Segment boundaries;
- Influence of hatchery stocking programs; and
- Need to improve understanding of coastal cutthroat trout biology and ecology by investigating life history relations, and by determining the environmental and habitat factors associated with these life history strategies.

The Service encourages the development of collaborative conservation initiatives. Examples of such collaborative successes can be seen with other western native trout such as Bonneville cutthroat trout and Colorado River cutthroat trout. The coastal cutthroat trout would be a good candidate for such an initiative. Associated with the National Fish Habitat Initiative, funded in fiscal years 2005 and 2006 by Congress, coastal cutthroat trout have been included in the proposed Western Native Trout Initiative.

This joint venture between the States and Federal land management agencies seeks to speed the implementation of conservation strategies for numerous western native trouts.

In summary, efforts to initiate broad-scale conservation and RME programs, participation in the Western Native Trout Initiative, and implementation of conservation activities under the ODFW MOU indicate the Service's commitment to coastal cutthroat trout conservation. The Service's broader vision is to assist with development of a range-wide coastal cutthroat trout conservation initiative. The Service remains committed to assist other interested and committed entities in development and implementation of local, regional, or range-wide coastal cutthroat trout conservation strategies, and commits to support and supplement these new coastal cutthroat trout conservation efforts.

References

- USFWS (United States Fish and Wildlife Service). 2002. Endangered and Threatened wildlife and plants; withdrawal of proposed rule to list the Southwestern Washington/Columbia River distinct population segment of the coastal cutthroat trout as threatened. Federal Register 67:129(5 July 2002): 44934-44961.