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News Release

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Removes Modoc Sucker from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Wildlife

Endangered Species Act central to successful recovery of fish once on the brink of extinction

Klamath Falls, Ore. — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced that, thanks to decades of collaborative conservation efforts under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), it is removing the Modoc sucker from the Act's protections. This marks the second-time that a fish has been 'delisted' due to recovery, the Oregon chub having been delisted earlier this year.

The Modoc sucker is a small fish native to the Upper Pit River Watershed in Southern Oregon and Northeastern California. The fish was listed as endangered in 1985 due to habitat loss and degradation from overgrazing, siltation and channelization due to agriculture practices. Predation from non-native fish and loss of genetic integrity due to hybridization with Sacramento suckers were also viewed as threats.

"The recovery of the Modoc sucker is great victory for conservation, for the Endangered Species Act, and for our natural heritage," said Service Director Dan Ashe. "When we are able to bring a species back from the brink of extinction, it is a milestone worthy of our national attention. We share this victory with a range of public and private conservation partners who came together to make delisting this species possible, providing another superb example of the kind of collaborative conservation that the ESA fosters so well."

The ESA has been successful in conserving imperiled wildlife, preventing the extinction of thousands of listed species since 1973. In addition, more than 30 species have been delisted due to recovery, including the bald eagle, American alligator, peregrine falcon, Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel, and now the Modoc sucker. Due to the ESA, species such as the whooping crane and the California condor have been pulled back from the brink of extinction.

When it was listed under the ESA, the Modoc sucker was found along only 12.9 miles of habitat in seven streams within two river sub-basins. Today, the known distribution of the Modoc sucker includes an estimated 42.5 miles of occupied habitat in 12 streams within three river sub-basins. Surveys show that Modoc suckers are well established in each of the streams where they were known to exist historically, and they appear to occupy nearly all available suitable habitat in the streams where they are currently found.

“The status of Modoc sucker has greatly improved under the protections of the Endangered Species Act,” said Laurie Sada, field supervisor for the Klamath Falls Fish and Wildlife Office. “This is thanks to restoration actions, improved land management practices on public and private lands, new genetic data, and an increased number of surveys revealing additional populations.”

Through the collaborative efforts of state and federal agencies and private landowners working under the ESA, the impacts from livestock grazing were reduced with improved management practices and the construction of fencing to exclude cattle from riparian areas on several streams. Although these practices will no longer be mandated now the Modoc sucker is delisted, conservation measures are expected to continue thanks to the improved relationship between the ranching and conservation communities fostered by the ESA.

Predation by non-native fish such as brown trout and largemouth bass has also been reduced due to better management practices, such as targeted removal of brown trout and the discontinuation of brown trout stocking in streams within the Pit River Basin.

In the Ash Creek sub-basin, brown trout and Modoc sucker populations co-existed for more than 75 years, suggesting that otherwise healthy Modoc sucker populations are resilient to traditional levels of brown trout predation. Screens placed on reservoir outlets have also been installed to prevent adults of exotic species such as largemouth bass from entering the upstream reaches of occupied streams.

“It often takes decades for a species to decline to the point where it needs the help of the ESA – the last resort for wildlife in need. Likewise, it can take decades to recover those species,” said Ashe. “But if we allow the ESA that time, it will succeed, as it has done here, first in preventing the extinction and then in bringing about the recovery of the Modoc sucker.”

The Service suggested at the time of listing that hybridization between Sacramento suckers and Modoc suckers was a threat. The Service now believes that the low levels of hybridization that do occur between the two species may, in fact, be part of the Modoc sucker’s natural evolutionary history.

The Service also evaluated the impacts of climate change on the Modoc sucker. Climate change is likely to result in decreased snowpack, earlier spring runoff, reduced summer stream flows, and increased water temperatures. These changes may negatively affect Modoc suckers, but there is too much uncertainty to know how populations will respond to these changes, especially given the species’ apparent resiliency to recent droughts.

For more information on this announcement and supporting documents, please visit us at www.fws.gov/klamathfallsfwo.

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