QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

12-MONTH FINDING
WESTSLOPE CUTTHROAT TROUT

1. What is the westslope cutthroat trout? Westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) is one of 14 subspecies of cutthroat trout native to the Rocky Mountain region. It is bright yellow, orange, and red and is generally distinguishable from other inland subspecies of cutthroat trout by the particular pattern of black spots that appear on the body.

2. Where are WCT found? Westslope cutthroat trout are native to streams and lakes in the upper Columbia River basin of western Montana, northern and central Idaho, and southern British Columbia and Alberta; the upper Missouri River basin of Montana and northwest Wyoming; the upper South Saskatchewan River basin of Montana and Alberta; the Methow River and Lake Chelan drainages in Washington; and the John Day River drainage in Oregon.

3. What is a 12-month finding? Publication in the Federal Register of a 12-month finding makes public the Service's decision on a petition to list a species as threatened or endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act. That finding is based on a detailed assessment of the available information on the species, as detailed in the species' status review. One of three possible conclusions can be reached as part of the finding: that listing is warranted, not warranted, or warranted but presently precluded by other higher-priority listing activities involving other species. In the case of WCT, the Service found that the WCT is not likely to become a threatened or endangered species within the foreseeable future. Therefore, listing of the WCT as a threatened or endangered species under the ESA is not warranted at this time.

4. Why did the petitioners think the westslope cutthroat is threatened? The petitioners stated that populations of WCT have been greatly reduced because of habitat destruction from logging and associated road building; adverse effects on habitat resulting from livestock grazing, mining, urban development, agricultural practices, and the operation of dams; historic and ongoing stocking of nonnative fish species that compete with or prey upon WCT or jeopardize the genetic integrity of the subspecies through hybridization; and excessive harvest by anglers. The petitioners further asserted that programs to protect and restore WCT are inadequate or nonexistent and populations of this fish continue to be threatened by a wide variety of ongoing and proposed activities.

5. What did the Service find regarding the status of WCT? The Service found that WCT presently inhabit about 4,275 tributaries or stream reaches that collectively encompass more than 23,000 linear miles of stream habitat, distributed among 12 major drainages and 62 component watersheds in the Columbia, Missouri, and Saskatchewan River basins. In addition, WCT presently inhabit 6 lakes in Idaho and Washington and at least 20 lakes in Glacier National Park, Montana. Although WCT stocks that formerly occupied large, mainstem rivers and lakes and their principal tributaries are reduced from their historic levels, the Service found that viable, self-sustaining WCT stocks remain widely distributed throughout the historic range of the subspecies, most notably in headwater areas.

6. Where are these remaining WCT stocks? The Service found that most of the habitat for extant WCT stocks lies on lands administered by federal agencies, particularly the U.S. Forest Service. Moreover, many of the strongholds for WCT stocks occur within roadless or wilderness areas or national parks, all of which afford considerable protection to WCT.

7. What other protections are afforded these WCT? There are numerous federal and state regulatory mechanisms that, if properly administered and implemented, protect WCT and their habitats throughout the range of the subspecies. In addition, the U.S. Forest Service, state game and fish departments, and National Park Service reported more than 700 ongoing projects directed toward the protection and restoration of WCT and their habitats. Finally, WCT accrue some level of protection from the ESA's Section 7 consultation process in geographic areas where WCT distribution overlaps with the distributions of one or more ESA-listed fish species, specifically, bull trout Salvelinus confluentus, steelhead O. mykiss, and Pacific salmon Oncorhynchus species and their habitats on federal lands in the Columbia River basin.

8. Where did the Service find its information on WCT? The Service received information pertinent to WCT from several state game and fish departments, the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, tribal governments, and private corporations, as well as private citizens, organizations, and other entities. The Service also reviewed information on WCT obtained from scientific journal articles, agency reports and file documents, telephone interviews and written correspondence with natural resources managers familiar with WCT, and other sources.

9. How were hybrid WCT taken into account in the status review? For the purposes of the status review, the Service assumed that the fish stocks that the state game and fish departments classified as WCT represented that subspecies, even though the precise genetic characteristics of those stocks may not have been known or the stocks consisted of intercross progeny that were the product of some low or non-detectable level of interbreeding between WCT and another fish species.

10. Do WCT have "distinct population segments?"

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service have adopted criteria for the designation of unique animal stocks, termed a distinct population segment (DPS), under the ESA. To constitute a DPS, a stock or group of stocks must be:

(1) discrete (i.e. spatially separated from other stocks of the taxon);

(2) significant (e.g., ecologically unique for the taxon; extirpation would produce a significant gap in the taxon's range; the only surviving native stock of the taxon; or there is substantial genetic divergence between the stock and other stocks of the taxon); and

(3)the status of the stock must warrant protection under the ESA.

During the status review, the Service found no compelling evidence in support of recognizing distinct population segments for WCT. Instead, a single WCT population was recognized for purposes of the status review.

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