Commonly Asked Questions and Answers

Proposal to Reintroduce Bull Trout to the Clackamas River

Q. What action is being considered?

A. Agencies are proposing to reintroduce a "nonessential experimental population" of bull trout into the upper Clackamas River, where they were once abundant and widely distributed.

Q. Who is working on this proposal?

A. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service. The U.S. Geological Survey is providing scientific support. Coordination on the proposal is occurring with the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon.

Q. Why take this action?

A. Bull trout are a species listed as "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act, and the goal of that law is to recover species from being threatened or endangered to the point that they no longer need its protection. Their reintroduction into the Clackamas River would meet objectives of the current Fish and Wildlife Service recovery strategy for the species in the Willamette Basin, as well as other agencies' goals to restore native fish communities.

Q. Why choose the Clackamas River for this proposal?

A. The Clackamas was considered for reintroduction even before the bull trout was listed as threatened, in years of discussion between the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. With these two key partners already exploring the possibility, and the need expressed in the bull trout recovery plan, it was logical to continue exploring the idea. There are other appropriate locations for bull trout reintroduction, and accomplishing this reintroduction will gain knowledge and experience that can be applied elsewhere. From the bull trout's perspective, the Clackamas is a good candidate because bull trout haven't been documented there since about 1963; the factors which caused them to disappear have been remedied, and about 70 miles of the upper river and tributaries contain suitable habitat for bull trout spawning and rearing.

Q. How can a "nonessential" population contribute to recovery?

A. A nonessential experimental population would contribute to the recovery of the bull trout in the Willamette Basin, but it is not essential to the survival of the species in the wild. The designation allows for greater flexibility in managing other land uses and human activities, without the usual level of protections being given to individuals of the reintroduced species. The designation of nonessential experimental populations [through Section 10(j)] was added to the Endangered Species Act in 1982 by Congress in order to increase the public's tolerance for putting a protected species back into an area where it had been previously.

Q. Would the agencies later want to change the nonessential population to an "essential" designation?

A. It is not likely that the Fish and Wildlife Service would propose to change the nonessential experimental population classification. Any changes that might become necessary would occur in cooperation with the State of Oregon and other affected parties and would require another federal rule-making process. The only likely change would be if the species recovers

and is removed from the list of threatened and endangered species, in which case the "nonessential experimental population" designation would be eliminated as part of the delisting.

Q. Would bull trout negatively impact salmon and steelhead in the Clackamas River?

A. Like many other native fish in the Clackamas River, bull trout will eat juvenile salmon and steelhead. They also will eat other fish which would have eaten juvenile salmon and steelhead. These predator/prey dynamics are complex, and despite the fact these species evolved together, it is uncertain whether bull trout would have a negative, positive, or neutral effect on today's salmon and steelhead populations. Because of this, the agencies are seeking to understand the potential impacts before making the decision to propose the reintroduction. A panel of expert scientists met in July 2008 to investigate potential bull trout effects on salmon and steelhead in the Clackamas River and to develop associated monitoring and management recommendations. Results from the workshop suggest the overall probability of extinction to salmon and steelhead in the Clackamas River from a successful bull trout reintroduction would be very low to moderately low. While the workshop provided an estimate of impact from expert scientists, actual baseline monitoring and evaluation in the Clackamas River prior to and following a reintroduction of bull trout would provide the data necessary to inform management options including reversing the reintroduction action if impacts are greater than anticipated.

Q. How is this proposed reintroduction affected by the completion of the 5-year status review of bull trout?

A. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed its 5-year status review of the bull trout with two recommendations: retain threatened status for the species as currently listed throughout its range, and evaluate whether distinct population segments (DPSs) exist and merit protection under the Endangered Species Act. The first recommendation validates the science and decisions underlying this proposal. Any change resulting from the second recommendation will be well in the future, and meanwhile the reasons for this proposal remain.

Q. Would the presence of a protected species in the Clackamas River affect land management activities, like timber harvest?

A. The proposal under consideration would be to designate a "nonessential experimental population," under the authority of Section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act, specifically to avoid restricting land management and recreational activities. Throughout the entire nonessential experimental population area, no federal agency or its contractors would be in violation of the Endangered Species Act for harming or killing bull trout as a result of any authorized agency action.

Q. What about impacts of this protected species on recreational river uses?

A. The reintroduction will not conflict with recreational uses of the river. For example, since it would be within a nonessential experimental population area, a person fishing in accordance with Oregon angling regulations would not be in trouble for inadvertently harming a bull trout.

Q. What activities will be prohibited because of this nonessential experimental population area?

A. It remains illegal to deliberately "take" (harm or kill) bull trout, which generally would occur if they are taken or possessed in violation of state fish and wildlife laws or regulations. In other words: fishing in violation of state regulations which results in catching these fish, or polluting the waters in violation of state or federal law, could result in additional penalties for harming the fish. Fishing and other activities conducted legally will not result in penalties if they happen to result in catching or otherwise harming the fish.

Q. Is it even biologically possible to reintroduce this threatened species here?

A. A report published in 2007 by the agencies concluded that the proposal would be feasible, given what was found on habitat quality and availability, suitable donor stocks, nonnative species interactions, available prey species and threats.

Q. Where in the Clackamas River would the fish be reintroduced?

A. They would be released into historical bull trout habitat in the upper Clackamas River above the confluence with the Collawash River. This reach contains the most suitable habitat for reintroductions.

Q. When might these fish be put into the Clackamas?

A. The reintroduction could begin in 2010 or 2011. Transfers would continue annually for the first phase of the reintroduction (approximately 7 years). Transfers of fish in phase two (years 8 through 15) would be contingent on the success of phase one.

Q. How would this reintroduced population contribute to recovery of the species?

A. The reestablishment of bull trout in the Clackamas River would reduce the risk of elimination of bull trout from the greater Willamette Basin, and contribute to stabilizing bull trout populations in the lower Columbia River. The specific recovery objectives that would be supported by this action are:

- Maintain current distribution of bull trout and restore distribution where recommended in recovery unit chapters.
- Maintain stable or increasing trend in abundance of bull trout
- Conserve genetic diversity and provide opportunity for genetic exchange.

Q. Where would the fish come from?

A. The most appropriate donor stock for the reintroduction has been determined to be from the Metolius River, in the Deschutes River Basin, a tributary of the lower Columbia River in north central Oregon.

Q. How many bull trout would be moved?

A. The proposed action includes the direct transfer of multiple life stages of bull trout from the Metolius River to the Clackamas River. Although current abundance of the donor stock would support more, we currently propose 30 adults, 30 subadults (more than two years old but not of reproductive age), 1,000 juveniles (age one and two years) and up to 10,000 fry annually at the onset of the project. The numbers and life stages of fish transferred annually will be linked strongly to the annual population size of the donor stock, as well as to information derived from monitoring and evaluating the success of the various life stages of the reintroduced fish over the initial years of the project.

Q. What happens after the bull trout are released in the river?

A. The Fish and Wildlife Service and partner agencies will monitor them to document survival, movement, spawning and natural recruitment. Reports will document the stocking rates and monitoring activities that took place during the previous year. Periodic progress reports will be released, and the agency will fully evaluate this reintroduction effort after phase one (ten years) is complete to determine whether to continue the project.

Q. Will the bull trout leave the area where they are released?

A. 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 on the upper Clackamas. To ensure that any reintroduced bull trout that may move are covered by the nonessential experimental population designations, the area's boundaries will extend downstream from the release areas 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 the area boundaries. If bull trout move outside the boundaries, the Fish and Wildlife Service could propose to extend the boundaries to include the entire range of the expanded population.