

Summary: Delayed-release chinook program performance audit

April 2010

- **Legislative mandate:** The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) operates the Puget Sound delayed-release chinook salmon program under a 1993 mandate from the Legislature (RCW 77.105). The law is aimed at restoring diminished recreational fisheries and enhancing salmon and marine bottomfish resources to assure sustained productivity in Puget Sound.
- **Funded by users:** The Puget Sound Recreational Salmon and Marine Fish Enhancement Program is funded through a portion of the revenue generated by the sale of recreational fishing licenses. The annual funding level is based on surveys that determine the number of licensed anglers fishing in Puget Sound.
- **Citizen oversight:** The program has a citizen oversight committee. WDFW will continue to work with the oversight committee to improve the program.
- **Economic benefit:** Sportfishing throughout Washington generates \$1.1 billion in economic benefits for the state, according to a 2006 national survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Puget Sound sport fisheries account for a significant portion of that total.
- **Delayed release:** As a strategy in meeting the goal of improving Puget Sound salmon fisheries, WDFW produces chinook salmon that remain in the Sound rather than migrating to the ocean. This is accomplished by holding hatchery-reared chinook in freshwater longer than they naturally would remain, reducing their natural tendency to migrate out of Puget Sound.
- **Proportion of total production:** Fish produced by the delayed-release program represent less than 5 percent of WDFW's total salmon production.
- **Production cost:** WDFW's cost to rear and release chinook salmon for the program is 11 cents for each sub-yearling fish, and 85 cents for each yearling fish produced. Because of this cost difference, WDFW has been shifting production toward sub-yearling fish.
- **Cost per fish caught:** According to the audit, the cost for each sub-yearling fish produced by the program and eventually caught by an angler is \$392. For yearlings, the cost for each fish caught is \$768 per fish. These figures reflect the fact that only a small number of fish produced in the program (one out of every 904 yearling fish) are actually caught by anglers. The low catch rate is due to fishing restrictions that protect wild salmon and low survival rates for fish that remain in Puget Sound. The comparable cost of yearling resident chinook caught during the 1970s has been estimated at \$56.

- **Production goal:** WDFW has not met the annual production goal of three million fish in most years of the program due to lack of hatchery rearing capacity and changes in rearing practices made to protect wild fish.
- **Audit recommendations:** WDFW concurs with the audit's recommendation to better define which yearling fish to count as part of the delayed release program, and will work with the oversight committee to implement the audit's recommendation. WDFW defers the other audit recommendations calling for legislative action to the Legislature.