

WDFW Response to Public Comments on the draft WDFW Hood Canal Winter Steelhead Supplementation HGMP received by e-mail.

Comment 1. : *I have lived here since 1989. I have friends that used to fish the Union River and stated it was one of the Top 10 Rivers in the State of Wa. for Steelhead. What has happened over this period of time? Also, what is the reason that you can't keep a Silver on this river but you can keep them on the Dewatto and Tahuya Rivers? Why is this river not discussed for being replanted with Steelhead?*

WDFW Response: Thank you for your enquiry regarding the cessation of stocking steelhead in the Union River system. I received your question as part of the public comment on the Hood Canal Winter Steelhead Hatchery and Genetic Management Plan.

Specific to the steelhead, catches in Puget Sound were heavily dependent on the Department of Game's past hatchery programs. Non-local, Chambers Creek stock winter steelhead were released into Hood Canal streams in the past to supply recreation fisheries. Development of the Chambers Creek winter stock at South Tacoma Hatchery in the 1940s and 1950s led to the establishment of the early winter run derivatives used in many Puget Sound rivers from the 1950's onward. Chambers stock was developed as an early timed stock that predominantly provided harvest of returning adults during the early winter months from November – January. All Chambers origin plants have been discontinued in the Hood Canal, and due to their earlier spawn timing and poor smolt-to-adult survival, it is unlikely that any naturally spawning Chambers Creek origin fish would contribute to the program.

The average catch of winter steelhead in the Union River from 1961/62 until the season was closed in 2004/05 was 92 fish per year, with the highest recorded catch (549) in the 1963/64 season. The catches in the Tahuya were marginally higher than in the Tahuya (average 83/season; range 0 to 337) or the Dewatto (average 47/season; range 0 to 173). In the late 1980s, the Department of Game was releasing about 15,000 winter steelhead smolts per year in the Union, and catches had fallen off to fewer than a couple dozen fish per year.

Subsequently, steelhead in Puget Sound – including the Hood Canal – were listed as threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act. The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted a Policy (POL-C3619), implementing Fishery and Hatchery Reform to advance the conservation and recovery of wild steelhead.

Among the Policy Guidelines were:

1. Use the principles, standards, and recommendations of the Hatchery Scientific Review Group (HSRG) to guide the management of hatcheries operated by the Department. In particular, promote the achievement of hatchery goals through adaptive management based on a structured monitoring, evaluation, and research program.
2. The Department will prioritize and implement improved broodstock management (including selective removal of hatchery fish) to reduce the genetic and ecological impacts of hatchery fish and improve the fitness and viability of natural production working toward a goal of achieving the HSRG broodstock standards for 100% of the hatchery programs by 2015.

The Hatchery Scientific Review Group recommended that the agency and co-managers implement establish a regional system of wild steelhead management zones, where streams are

not planted with hatchery fish and are instead managed for native stocks. Fishing for steelhead in these zones would not be incompatible with this approach, but no hatchery-produced steelhead should be introduced. Such zones would reduce the risk of naturally spawning fish interbreeding with hatchery fish, and provide native stocks for future fisheries programs.

The Puget Sound Hatchery Action Advisory Committee was created in 2011 to advise WDFW on potential modifications to the State's hatchery programs in Puget Sound, and has recommended that the Hood Canal be designated as a Wild Steelhead Management Zone (WSMZ) when the native steelhead conservation supplementation program in the Hamma Hamma River is sunset.

The current Hood Canal steelhead supplementation project was initiated with embryos from naturally spawned steelhead redds, with the intent of rebuilding the native runs, rather than as a fishery supplementation program. The initial stage of the project took place in the Hamma Hamma watershed from 1998 to 2008. In 2007 program was expanded and embryo collections began in the Dewatto, Duckabush and Skokomish River.

The closure on the Union River for salmon is to allow the coho stock to rebuild, and to reduce impacts to ESA-listed summer chum, which return at the same time as the silvers.

I hope that this answers your questions. Feel free to contact WDFW District 15 Fish Biologist Mark Downen (360-202-7005) regarding steelhead populations and management in this watershed.

Comment 2. : *I'm at a loss as to why the Tahuya River is not included in the program. It seems that so much could be accomplished with a relatively minimal added cost. Can the list of targeted streams be expanded?*

WDFW Response: Thank you for your support of the program to rebuild the native steelhead population in mid-Hood Canal, and your question about the potential to expand the program to the Tahuya River system. I received your question as part of the public comment on the Hood Canal Winter Steelhead Hatchery and Genetic Management Plan.

The simple reason is that the Tahuya River was chosen as one of the "Control" streams for this experimental program. To be scientifically valid, it is necessary that the results in the Hamma Hamma and other streams could be compared to streams where supplementation was not occurring. Otherwise, the researchers would not be able to tease out the effects of natural events such as ocean survival, marine predation, and so forth.

Initial results indicate that the program has a good chance of achieving the goals for the stock, at least in the short-term. However, recent poor ocean survival trends of steelhead from this region may make this more difficult.

If the program ultimately proves successful, it could serve as a model for steelhead conservation programs in other watersheds. Like all integrated hatchery programs, success will depend on good habitat being available to both the hatchery- and natural-origin components of the integrated population

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