

State help sought in restoring salmon

BY TERRI MORGAN
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The fate of central California's dwindling population of wild coho salmon rests on the health of two creeks that Santa Cruz County's watershed manager says need restoration.

Dave Hope, senior resource planner for the county's watershed management program, will ask the state Fish and Game Commission to approve a plan to restore Scott and Waddell creeks when it meets Thursday and Friday in San Diego. The two waterways, which drain into the Pacific Ocean south of San Mateo County, provide critical spawning grounds for the few remaining

native salmon.

The commission's approval could pave the way for state funding to help implement the work. If the county restoration plan gets a green light, Hope will ask the state board for funds.

Hope said he is prepared to play hardball if the county's restoration plan is rejected. If the commission turns down the county's recovery plan, Hope said, he will file a petition asking the state to list the coho salmon in Scott and Waddell creeks a threatened species. The petition has already been prepared by the Santa Cruz County Fish and Game Advisory Commission.

Once-thriving, coho salmon are nearly extinct along the central

coast. Just 30 years ago, 18 streams south of San Francisco supported natural populations. Today, native stocks are found only in Waddell and Scott creeks. Salmon in the San Lorenzo River and other area streams begin their lives in hatcheries.

"There were probably as many as 100,000 (native) coho south of San Francisco at one time," said Hope. "Last year we had 100 coho salmon."

Hope added, "This was a free gift that ran forever, until we came along. Nobody's got the right to let these fish disappear."

Salmon are hatched in fresh water, then migrate into the ocean as yearlings. They return to their native streams about two

years later to spawn. Low water levels, caused by drought and the diversion of water for agriculture and other human uses, can prevent the fish from entering the streams.

Sedimentation caused by erosion and human impact can obscure the gravel beds needed to house salmon eggs and young hatchlings. Sediment in the water can also cloud the deep pools salmon require for spawning. Overfishing, predation by marine mammals and other factors also have contributed to the decline of the species.

Santa Cruz County is willing to commit its entire stream restoration program toward the recovery of the coho salmon, Hope



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said. All new stream restoration grants and the attention of the county's watershed staff would be diverted to improving the condition of those two creeks.