

Steelhead protected

Central Coast population labeled 'threatened'

By DONNA KIMURA
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SANTA CRUZ — The prized sea-going steelhead was protected Monday under the Endangered Species Act.

The National Marine Fisheries Service classified the fish as "threatened" on the Central Coast, where its populations are a shadow of what they once were.

The effort to restore the steelhead's numbers looks to have consequences on sport fishermen and others, depending largely on the recovery plans that will be developed by state and local officials.

"There is no dispute that these fish are in serious trouble," said Terry D. Garcia, acting assistant secretary for oceans and atmosphere for the U.S. Department of Commerce. "Our commitment to salmon and steelhead conservation is clear — we must restore these magnificent fish. The law requires it, common sense calls for it, and our sense of what constitutes a strong economy and healthy ecosystem dictate it."

In total, five populations of Pacific coast steelhead were given new protection.

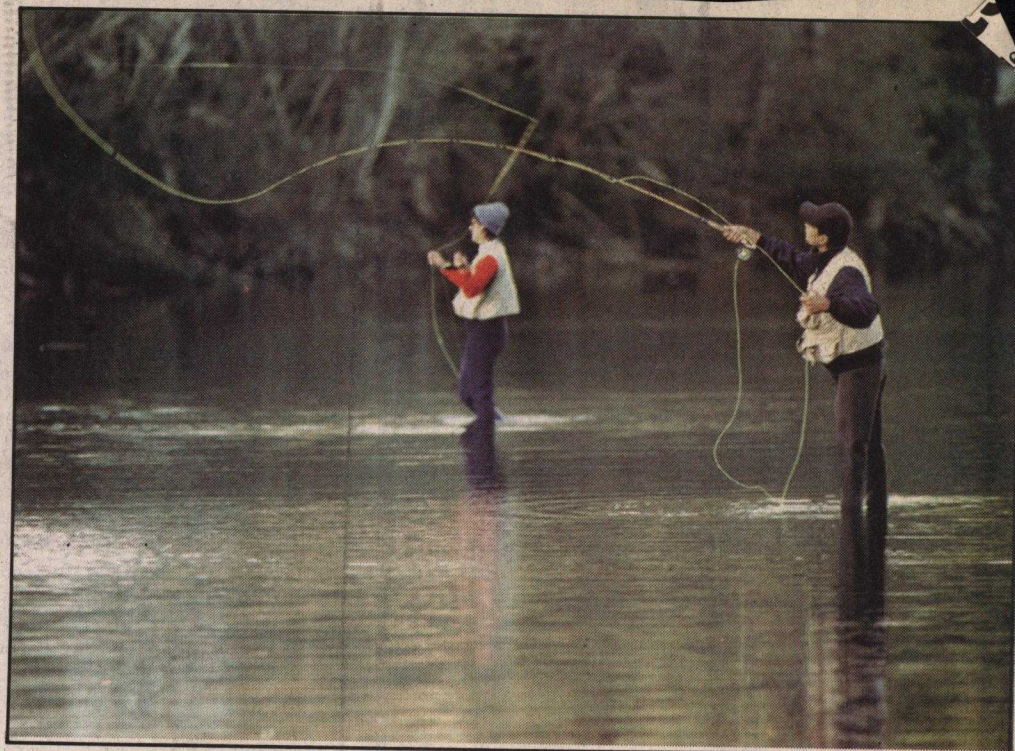
The most direct impact will likely be felt by sport fishermen.

Listed as "endangered" — at risk of becoming extinct in the foreseeable future — are steelhead in the upper Columbia River from the Yakima River upstream to Chief Joseph Dam in Washington, and in Southern California from the Santa Maria River to just south of Malibu Creek, north of Los Angeles.

Listed as "threatened" — likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future — are steelhead in the Snake River Basin encompassing parts of Idaho, Washington and Oregon; the Central California coast; and the South-Central California coast.

NMFS officials said the listing will take effect in 60 days. "What NMFS is trying to

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Anglers, like these casting for steelhead on the San Lorenzo in 1993, could be limited to keeping only steelhead from hatcheries and releasing all wild fish when the local recovery plan has been worked out.

Steelhead

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do is get local governments and the state to develop local recovery plans," said Dave Hope, senior resource planner for Santa Cruz County.

This area, he said, has an advantage because of its experience with the coho salmon, which was listed as threatened late last year, and the number of people working in watershed management.

"It looks like a lot of our existing programs are well-designed," Hope said.

In letters sent to governors of California, Washington, Idaho and Oregon, NMFS administrators cited a range of causes for steelhead decline that would have to be addressed. They included timber harvest, agriculture, water diversions, hydropower operations, gravel mining, urbanization, hatchery practices and fishing.

The most direct impact will likely be felt by sport fishermen.

Anglers will likely be able to continue to take hatchery fish, but would have to release wild fish back into the water, Hope said. Hatchery fish are identified by a clipped fin.

"Most local fishermen don't have a problem with that," he said.

Still, it may mean educating more anglers on how to distinguish hatchery fish from wild steelhead as well as how to properly catch and return a fish unharmed into the river.

Allowing some sport fishing was an important element that people conveyed to national officials, said Hope.

"Fishermen are one of our best allies for stream restoration and

protection," he said.

Steelhead — like salmon — migrate from streams to oceans and back. The young hatch in fresh water, where they grow and live for a year or more, and then swim to sea. They return to their birthplace to spawn in clean, silt-free gravel, then swim back to the ocean until the next spawning season.

The San Lorenzo River has been a popular stream for steelhead fishing. In the 1960s, the annual run was estimated to be about 20,000. Now that figure is believed to be between 1,000 and 5,000, according to some estimates. Local creeks also support steelhead populations.

The implications for timber, water users and other industries remain unclear.

The leader of The California Farm Bureau Federation said he hoped that the "threatened" designation along the Central Coast will allow federal officials to seek cooperative working arrangements with landowners.

"Voluntary, incentive-based landowner programs is the better way to protect species," said President Bob L. Vice. "The government's top-down, command-and-control approach has not worked in the last 24 years. There's been little flexibility in the law to involve farmers and ranchers in the process. Enlisting their help is critical to species recovery efforts and would be less costly to the federal treasury in the long run."

The local timber industry is "up to speed" on conservation measures for the coho, which may be similar for the steelhead, according to Hope.

Santa Cruz County leaders sat down with representatives of the state Department of Forestry and the timber industry to design a

program that provides protection for the coho such as special shading and erosion-control measures.

They have been doing this almost a year although locals are still awaiting interim guidelines on the coho from federal officials.

The new designation for steelhead will also affect the Monterey Bay Salmon & Trout Project, the local non-profit organization dedicated to restoring and enhancing native salmon and steelhead populations.

The project releases about 100,000 steelhead each year into streams throughout Santa Cruz County.

It looks like the group will have to go through a higher-level permit process, said board Chairman Matt McCaslin. It may even affect what steelhead stocks it can work with this winter, he said.

In the letters to the governors, NMFS leaders said conservation plans must "include hatchery-reform measures to protect the diversity and integrity of naturally spawning populations, harvest constraints, ... and habitat measures to protect and restore the watersheds that support Pacific salmon and steelhead."

The listing was needed in Southern California, but it wasn't warranted for every stream on the Central Coast such as Scott Creek, according to McCaslin.

"I think it is one of the best steelhead runs going," he said. "It's one of the top 10 in California in terms of number of fish per square mile."

He worried that the listing could bring unfair restrictions to land users in that watershed.

The North Coast stream has an adequate returning population that spawns in the stream and proves the freshwater habitat is in good condition, he said.