

State to help restore coho salmon

BY TERRI MORGAN
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A state agency has agreed to help Santa Cruz County restore two creeks supporting the last remnants of Central California's once-thriving population of wild coho salmon.

The California Department of Fish and Game will contribute staff and equipment to help the county's watershed management program with a recovery plan for Scott and Waddell creeks. The two waterways, which drain into the Pacific Ocean at the northern end of the county, provide critical spawning grounds for the few re-

maining native salmon found south of San Francisco.

The state Fish and Game Commission, a five-member advisory board, last week approved a management plan for the two creeks drafted by Dave Hope, the county's watershed manager.

"The commission thought it was a very good recovery plan," said Bob Treanor, executive director of the advisory board.

Tim Farley, chief of the inland fisheries division for the Department of Fish and Game, agreed.

"My staff reviewed the restoration plan

and agreed with most of it," Farley said. "We've had projects going on in those two basins for the last 10 years. We'll step up the emphasis now."

Ongoing projects include habitat and stream flow studies for the two creeks, Farley said. He plans to meet with county representatives within the next month to coordinate plans.

Wild coho salmon once thrived along the Central Coast, with 18 streams south of San Francisco supporting natural populations. While hatcheries have helped reintroduce salmon into area streams, native

stocks are now found only in Scott and Waddell creeks. Last year, biologists counted about 100 native coho salmon returning to those two waterways to spawn.

Neighboring landowners, however, say they have worked hard to keep the creeks healthy and are uneasy about the restoration project, partly because they haven't seen the county's plans yet.

Al Smith, 72, whose family owns 3,250 acres between Scott and Waddell creeks, said he is worried the project might restrict his family's access to the creek.

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"We're environmentally concerned and have always cooperated with Fish and Game," he said. "But now I would just like to be left alone."

His neighbor, Bud McCrary, whose family has owned property in the area since the 1860s, said one of the biggest problems facing the salmon is the growing seal and sea lion population, not habitat degradation. He is also worried about the effect stream work may have on his property.

"What assurances are we going to have that it won't divert water onto our land?" McCrary asked. "These streams are subject to great upheavals at times. During floods, things can change drastically in a matter of minutes."

Many factors have contributed to the salmon decline, including an increase in the population of predatory marine mammals, loss of habitat and diminishing stream flows. Overfishing, competition for resources, disease, and the introduction of non-native species have also affected the coho populations.

Salmon are hatched in fresh water, then migrate into the ocean a year later. After two years they return to their native streams to spawn. Low water levels caused by drought, diversion of water for human uses, the proliferation of trees along stream banks and other factors can prevent the fish from entering the creeks.

Sedimentation can obscure the gravel beds needed to house salmon eggs and young hatchlings.

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neighboring landowner

Sediment in the water can also cloud the deep pools salmon require for spawning. McCrary said in recent years wild pigs have damaged the stream banks, causing erosion that clouds the creeks.