

**STEELHEAD:** Numerous problems contributing to declining numbers

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this year is the lowest ever recorded. As of this week, just over 29,000 steelhead passed Bonneville Dam since July 1 — that’s less than half the average of the past five years.”

Steelhead trout hatch in freshwater rivers and streams, migrate to the ocean, and return to fresh water to spawn.

Sisters-based fly-fishing guide Steve Erickson says that the declining numbers represent an economic threat to fishing guides, but even more dangerously, a serious threat to the ecology of the region.

“It’s pretty dire,” he said, noting that the record low comes on the heels of years of decline in the 10-year moving average on returns. “The bar’s been going down for the past five or six years.”

The conditions have led even those who make part of their living on the

fishery to urge that it be shut down for a year. The Associated Press reported that “a coalition of conservation and fishing groups sent a letter to the Oregon, Washington, and Idaho agencies that manage fish and wildlife requesting an immediate closure of recreational steelhead fisheries on the Columbia River, the Lower Snake River, and their tributaries.”

Erickson, who guides for The Fly Fisher’s Place in Sisters, said that a shutdown would have some impact on the local business.



PHOTO COURTESY STEVE ERICKSON

A precipitous drop in steelhead numbers is of grave concern to fishing guides like Steve Erickson (right) of Sisters.

“We pursue steelhead in addition to trout on multi-day trips,” he said.

That amounts to 10 to 15 trips in a year.

“It does affect us a little bit,” he said.

Erickson said he agrees with guides who are joining conservation organizations in advocating closing the fishery.

“I think that’s good; I think that’s noble,” he said. “It’s guides walking the walk, talking the talk.”

However, he noted, simply shutting recreational fishing for a year won’t fix what is becoming a chronic problem.

“It’s the low-hanging fruit,” he said. “It’s the least impactful solution possible.”

Erickson identifies an interlinked set of conditions that contribute to steelhead decline, including habitat degradation; offshore netting; gill-netting on the Columbia River; seal predation; and water-temperature management.

“There are numerous problems that point toward the epicenter.”

The Oregon Department of Fish

and Wildlife lists several keys to recovery of populations for salmon and steelhead:

- Protect and restore critical estuary and tributary habitat.

- Continue to set sport and commercial fishing seasons that emphasize the harvest of hatchery fish with minimum impact on wild populations.

- Propose ways in which the Columbia River hydro-power system can be better managed to protect juvenile and adult fish, and reduce negative impacts on downstream habitat.

- Minimize the number of “straying” hatchery fish that spawn in the wild and, where appropriate, establish wild fish sanctuaries in certain watersheds by excluding hatchery fish.

- Reduce competition with

non-native and hatchery fish in the estuary, and predation by pikeminnow, Caspian terns, and marine mammals.

Such a significant decline in numbers poses a problem even if states undertake actions like closing fisheries.

“You’re not going to have this magical rebound where you have a great year, because you arithmetically can’t,” Erickson said. “You don’t have enough population to reproduce.”

The guide worries not only about business and about this particular fishery, but the cascading effect on the whole ecology of the region, which is profoundly interconnected. He believes that long-term solutions have to come from “a level above local, state, and maybe even regional influences.”

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