

Lawsuit seeks to add coho salmon to endangered list

WASHINGTON (AP) — Conservationists and fishermen filed a lawsuit Thursday to try to force the government to make decisions due last year on whether another West Coast salmon species should be declared endangered.

Postponement of the listing decisions, in one case 15 months late, is moving the West Coast coho closer to the brink of extinction in California, Oregon and Washington, a coalition of 24 groups said in the suit filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco.

"It is time for the federal government to comply with the law and take action before coho are gone forever," said Mike Sherwood, an attorney for the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund.

A spokesman for the National Marine Fisheries Service said Thursday a decision is expected this summer on whether to propose protection of the fish under the Endangered Species Act.

Different proposals are anticipated for the six population sectors between the Canadian border and Monterey, Calif., NMFS spokesman Brian Gorman said.

So far, the biggest threats to the coho runs have been identified in California, where the majority of coho habitat still remaining is found on private land, he said.

The Snake River sockeye salmon and two varieties of Snake River chinook salmon already are protected under the Endangered Species Act.

NMFS announced in October 1993 that the status of the West Coast coho warranted a listing review and was supposed to complete the review by October 1994.

"There is no doubt some of the runs are in real trouble but I don't think we are going to see in the short run disastrous results from any delay," Gorman said in a telephone interview Thursday from the agency's regional headquarters in Seattle.

Gorman said the ruling was delayed because a series of population reviews have been combined into one. The listing proposals will vary for the six distinct populations, grouped as:

Puget Sound, Olympic Peninsula, Oregon Coast, Central California, Lower Columbia River-Southwest Washington and Northern California-Southern Oregon.

"They will not all be the same," Gorman said. "Further inland and farther south, the conditions of the fish become more perilous. The habitat is more degraded."

"In some cases we are talking returns in the order of hundreds where they were in the order of tens of thou-

sands a generation ago. In one particular instance [in California] there are about 150 fish out of a population earlier this century of 500,000," he said.

While hydropower dams are blamed for the demise of Snake River and Columbia River salmon, the West Coast coho live below dams.

Gary Smith, NMFS' acting regional director when the population review was launched in 1993, said at the time that over-harvesting, poor ocean survival, drought and habitat destruction from logging, agriculture and urban development all "have taken a heavy toll on coho salmon."

Tryg Sletteland, a salmon specialist for the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund in Seattle, said the delay in protection was sending coho populations plummeting further in all three states.

"Our coastal economies need the protection afforded by the Endangered Species Act today," Sletteland said.

Diane Valentine of the Oregon Natural Resources Council said coho fishing brought the region \$70 million a year during the 1970s.

"This is a case of jobs being saved by the Endangered Species Act — jobs in the sport and commercial fishing industry," she said.

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