

Clock ticking for Chinook

By Jeff Barnard
The Associated Press

GRANTS PASS, Ore. — A closer look at a "doomsday clock" for wild Chinook salmon in the Snake River offers even less time to reverse the trend toward extinction, according to a study done for a national conservation group.

Unless dramatic steps are taken to reverse the trend, wild spring/summer Chinook in the Snake will effectively be extinct by the year 2016, a year earlier than previously predicted, said the study for Trout Unlimited, released Wednesday.

"The message is these fish are really in trouble," said Jeff Curtis, the group's western conservation director. "We've got to make the hard decisions now. We can't come up with a plan that says we play around the edges for the next eight or 10 years and see where we are."

Curtis was referring to the National Marine Fisheries Service plan for restoring Columbia Basin salmon, which stops short of calling for breaching four dams on the lower Snake in

eastern Washington, while relying heavily on improving survival of young fish before they migrate to the ocean.

NMFS plans to reconsider whether to breach the dams, but not for another five years. An NMFS study published in the journal "Science" suggested that improved survival of young salmon would do more to restore populations than dam breaching.

Meanwhile, a federal mandate to spill extra water over Columbia River hydroelectric dams to help young salmon migrate to the ocean has been suspended so that more water can be devoted to producing electricity while energy demands are high during current drought conditions.

The risk of extinction could be reduced if favorable ocean conditions continue and the drought ends, the study said.

The study was done by Gretchen R. Oosterhout of Decision Matrix Inc., a specialist in risk assessment, and salmon biologist Philip Mundy, who did a similar study two years ago.

The work goes beyond the "Dooms-

day Clock 1999" study by adding two more years of data on spawning success in the Snake River's tributaries, and more statistical analysis that takes into account the peaks and valleys of salmon returns.

The study said spawning and rearing habitats for many Snake River salmon have improved, and survival of just-hatched Chinook "continues to be good to excellent."

Based on more than 40 years of salmon counts, the study predicts the weakest runs, located in Marsh Creek and the Imnaha River, will be extinct by the year 2007, while the strongest, in Poverty Flat, can hold out until 2033.

The overall probability of extinction within 24 years was calculated at 67 percent. The year 2016 was tagged as the median year — half the salmon runs would become extinct by then, half after.

Still, the study's authors found reason for "anxious optimism," saying "there still is hope, but it diminishes with time, and very little of that is left."



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FCC approves VoiceStream buyout

By Gina Holland
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government approved the takeover of VoiceStream Wireless by German giant Deutsche Telekom, a deal that will boost the company's position as a national wireless competitor.

In announcing its decision Wednesday, the Federal Communications Commission said it concluded that the merger was in the public interest. That key finding was necessary in this case because it involves foreign ownership of a U.S. telecommunications company.

The commission can prevent any telecom concern which is more than 25 percent foreign or foreign-government-owned from controlling a U.S. business through a holding company. But it chose not to do so in this case.

The vote to approve the merger was 4-0.

"U.S. consumers will benefit

from the effects of the proposed merger, which will include the build-out and extension of VoiceStream's network," the FCC said.

The regulatory agency also said that in response to concerns raised by the public, it found that Deutsche Telekom "would have neither the incentive nor the ability to engage in unfair competition, specifically predatory pricing, in the U.S. domestic mobile telephone market."

The commission concluded that as a result of the merger, U.S. consumers would have a broader variety of choices when they shop for cell phone services.

Completing the deal with the capital-rich Deutsche Telekom — which is majority-owned by the German government — also should enable VoiceStream to compete more effectively in U.S. auctions for airwaves space.

The Committee on Foreign In-

vestment in the United States still must clear the deal before it is final.

The merger had faced stern opposition from a group of lawmakers, led by Sen. Ernest Hollings, D-S.C., who offered legislation last year to block U.S. takeovers by telecom companies more than 25 percent foreign-government-owned. They say that having the backing of a foreign government creates an unfair playing field in the telecom market.

The measure did not make it through Congress, in part because trade officials and other lawmakers felt it could damage relationships with partners from the World Trade Organization.

A 1997 WTO agreement opened more foreign telecommunications markets to investment by U.S. businesses. In turn, the United States pledged to offer foreign companies greater access to its telecom market.



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