

Revitalized Sea Resources is going swimmingly

Old hatchery gets new life in Chinook

By **PATRICK WEBB**
Chinook Observer

CHINOOK, Wash. — Sea Resources is poised for a major comeback.

Supporters of the oldest fish hatchery in Washington state have regrouped, ready for a busy spring and summer.

“Everybody is saying if we don’t do something our fishing is going to die,” said Nansen Malin, of Seaview, the group’s vice president.

Malin, board president Kenny Osborne and other supporters are optimistic that revitalizing the hatchery, along with continued efforts to enhance regional salmon habitat, must be priorities.

“This is a community legacy that cannot be let go,” Malin said. “We are going back into the salmon-production business this spring.

“We are in the perfect place to do it, because we don’t compete with the natural runs and we are so close to the bay — and we have the infrastructure.”

Coho, chum and Chinook salmon will be the priority species for production; some rainbow trout may be introduced in area lakes.

“Chinook is the ‘holy grail,’” she said.

The concrete raceways where the fish grow, the egg room and classroom are all targeted for a makeover. Other efforts include replacing signs, many damaged in the 2007 storm, recruiting board members and volunteers, and liaising with state agencies on changing regulations.

The new energy has Osborne excited. While a student at Ilwaco High School in the 1970s, he spent hours learning hands-on environmental science at the hatchery.

“We have been essentially ‘waiting in the wings’ for the opportunity to again raise fish and hopefully propagate returning fish,” said Osborne, a longtime Sea Resources board member who works in real estate and as an insurance broker. “We have all the basic tools in place and with some upgrades we hope to be getting going.”

Origins

Sea Resources was established in 1893 by Alfred E. Houchen, a former cabin boy on a British man-of-war who deserted in Canada and worked his way south.

Houchen ended up on a Bear River tideland farm performing early fish culture



Nansen Malin, vice president of the board of Sea Resources, points toward the old concrete raceways used for rearing salmon at the Chinook hatchery.

experiments before moving to Chinook property owned by Jasper Prest and working with John McGowan to create a hatchery.

The hatchery was taken over by the state in 1890. They and their successors experimented with transporting fish from traps on Baker Bay to the hatchery for artificial propagation.

“They were really forward thinking — it’s pretty impressive,” said Malin, who has been involved with Sea Resources for a dozen years.

Traps were banned in 1935, and the state closed the hatchery.

A revised entity became a nonprofit in the early 1960s. Over the years, its operations have focused on an educational component; this began a collaboration with Ocean Beach School District in 1969. Students were trained in salmon propagation, with an eye toward employment in other Pacific Northwest hatcheries.

Although these vocational programs that Osborne and others benefited from are no longer in place, tours and programs have continued, focusing on the three areas of salmon propagation, watershed restoration and native plants. The hatchery is a popular field trip destination for home-schoolers.

Several collaborations have taken place with the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce, most designed to enhance habitat.

In recent years, the board has entered into an agreement with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to manage the Chinook River Tide Gate. Water flow has a significant impact on the development of habitat.

It is all part of a strategy that exploits the fact that the Chinook River watershed does not have a natural salmon run or any endangered species in the immediate vicinity, Malin said.

Impetus

Gov. Jay Inslee has set Department of Fish and Wildlife leaders to work with a task force to save southern resident killer whales from extinction. These orcas split their time between Puget Sound and the outer coast, often hunting for Chinook in the vicinity of the mouth of the Columbia River. Studies estimate two out of three calves are lost because the orcas have insufficient Chi-

nook salmon. Hatcheries are among partners in this group’s coordinated campaign to provide more fish.

Sea Resources supporters want to be part of that effort and were considerably boosted in May by a \$475,000 bequest from the late Ella and Virgil Worthington, a peninsula couple who died at ages 108 and 102, and split their estate between the hatchery and the Ocean Beach Educational Foundation.

The revitalized Sea Resources is strongly supported by Wayne Harmond, president of Northwest Salmon Research, a group which combines conserva-

tionists and fishermen.

Harmond grew up in Longview, taking trips to the peninsula in the late 1960s with his fisherman father, crabbing in Ilwaco, surf casting from the jetty and clamming on Long Beach. He later worked as a commercial fisherman in Alaska, returning to Washington when the runs diminished.

“At a time when many salmon enhancement, education and production organizations were disappearing or shutting down, Sea Resources has remained steadfast,” said Harmond, who is based in Gig Harbor.

He said the number of healthy adult salmon return-

ing is insufficient. “Wild salmon recovery is not happening fast enough or in large enough numbers to keep up with our growing population impacts and needs.”

He said Sea Resources’ location — in the lowest reaches of the Columbia, away from any natural or environmentally protected salmon runs — could mean it becoming the most important salmon hatchery in the state.

Key role

Butch Smith, who has been acting as an adviser, agreed that Sea Resources is positioned to play a key role. The third-generation fisherman owns Coho Charters, is president of the Ilwaco Charter Association and serves on the Ilwaco Port Commission.

“We like the work on getting production up for local commercial and sport fishermen — as a port commissioner, I want to see all forms succeed,” he said. “Having healthy fish in our area means a healthy community.”

A chance meeting with Smith, and the discovery of their shared values, led Jules Orr, owner of the Salt Hotel and Pub, to join the Sea Resources board. His father worked in salmon enhancement and he interned at a hatchery during his high school years. He hopes the hatchery will rekindle links with area students to allow them to embrace lifelong lessons as he did.

“In the short term, they will probably remember their time at the hatchery as a cold damp day with the hum of pumps, no cellphone service and the smell of fish,” Orr said. “In the long term, I hope and expect they will not forget their involvement in the salmon life cycle and make choices that support salmon and other natural resources.”

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