

Status of Central California Coast Coho Salmon

Central California Coast (CCC) coho salmon are listed as an endangered species under both the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the California Endangered Species Act (CESA). Despite ongoing habitat restoration efforts, CCC coho salmon populations throughout their coastal range (Santa Cruz to Mendocino counties) have plummeted to historic lows. In comparison, many coho salmon populations from Mendocino to Del Norte counties remain relatively stable although they too are experiencing historic lows in some areas (e.g. Mattole and Shasta rivers). The northern populations are listed under ESA and CESA but as a threatened species. In some streams where water diversion has impaired adequate instream surface flow, coho salmon populations are very weak.

In response to the extreme status of the CCC coho salmon population in the Russian River, the Department of Fish and Game (DFG) captured the majority of known juvenile coho salmon within that river system and placed them in a federal hatchery operated by DFG for a pilot captive broodstock program. The recruited juveniles were reared to adult stage, spawned and their progeny were released to suitable waters in the Russian River drainage.

The decline of the CCC coho salmon is well documented by federal and state agencies and non-governmental organizations working with salmon recovery in California. All of these entities support the broodstock program as a recovery tool, and stress the imperative to employ all available recovery strategies for this species.

Some members of the development, forestry and agricultural communities believe listing of the coho salmon was unnecessary, despite scientific data demonstrating the grave status of coho salmon populations. Potential ramifications to their industries appear to preclude support for listing of the species.

It is not unusual for a species to experience a slow recovery; in the six years since inception of the broodstock program, a rebound in the natural adult population in the Russian River has yet to be demonstrated. Nonetheless, DFG and its federal partners are now considering expansion of the broodstock program as an emergency management tool to help stem further declines of CCC coho salmon in Marin and Sonoma counties, and possibly Mendocino County. Fishery scientists from DFG and federal and state agencies are evaluating expansion of the Russian River facility for other streams in an effort to stave off further declines or extirpations in these waters, and to preserve the genetics unique to different populations and waters used by this species. It is not known whether recovery of the CCC coho salmon will be successful, yet every management and recovery tool is being considered. Without continuous effort, viable opportunities to recover this species may be lost.