

Cowlitz River Fisheries & Hatchery Management Plan Frequently Asked Questions

What are the goals and objectives of the Fisheries & Hatchery Management Plan (FHMP)?

The goal of the FHMP is to achieve recovery of natural-origin salmonid populations in the Cowlitz River while providing sustainable fisheries. The plan must meet requirements set forth in the federal license for Tacoma Power's Cowlitz River Hydroelectric Project. The listing of some salmon species as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) plays a significant part in the terms of Tacoma Power's federal license and, therefore, in the content of the FHMP.

Who approved the FHMP and who can amend or update it?

The FHMP is approved by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) and is a license order to Tacoma Power. The plan is updated every six years. Advising on the plan update are the members of the Cowlitz Fisheries Technical Committee (FTC). These include representatives from U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA-Fisheries), Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, Washington Department of Ecology, Yakama Nation, American Rivers/Trout Unlimited and Tacoma Power.

Why is the FHMP concerned with hatchery-origin fish spawning with natural-origin fish?

The priority goal is the recovery of natural-origin salmon and steelhead populations to healthy and harvestable levels. When natural-origin fish spawn with other natural-origin fish they are genetically stronger to survive in the natural environment than when they spawn with hatchery-origin fish. In addition, hatchery-origin fish can impact natural-origin populations through competition for spawning and rearing habitat and by preying upon natural-origin fish.

Sometimes it is necessary to allow some mixing of hatchery-origin and natural-origin populations because the number of natural-origin fish needs to be supplemented to more quickly build their total population. The challenging balance is to produce larger populations of fish while limiting genetic and ecological harm caused by sharing spawning and rearing habitat with hatchery-origin fish.

What is being done to improve smolt collection in the upper Cowlitz River basin?

Downstream migrant (smolt) collection is a major focus and task of Tacoma Power and the FTC. There currently are multiple methods being used to collect smolts above and below Cowlitz Falls Dam. A plan is in place to construct a new collector at Cowlitz Falls

Dam in 2015-2016. The Cowlitz Falls North Shore Collector Facility will be operational in 2017 and be supplemented by collection efforts in upper Riffe Lake.

What sport fishing opportunities exist in the upper Cowlitz basin?

The upper Cowlitz River above Cowlitz Falls Dam and the Cispus River are open for hatchery-origin coho, spring Chinook, fall Chinook and rainbow trout harvest. The Tilton River is open for hatchery-origin coho and hatchery-origin fall Chinook salmon. Additional fishing opportunities exist in Mayfield and Riffe Lakes. Mayfield Lake supports a healthy trout fishery while Riffe Lake supports a popular fishery for landlocked coho salmon and warm water fish.

What is the plan, if any, for providing fish ladders past the Cowlitz River dams?

There are no plans for fish ladders past the dams on the Cowlitz River for volitional upstream passage. Adult fish will continue to be trucked around the dams in Tacoma Power fish trucks. Tacoma Power has established a multi-million dollar fund for habitat protection and restoration activities above Mayfield Dam in lieu of adult fish passage during the current license period (until 2038).

How will the decision be made whether or not to build adult fish passage at Mayfield Dam?

The Cowlitz Hydro Project Settlement Agreement (SA) set forth the steps necessary for making the decision regarding fish passage over the dams during this license period. A productivity test was necessary to determine if natural-origin salmon or steelhead populations are self-sustaining in the Tilton River and upper Cowlitz basin. The productivity test utilizes only natural-origin winter steelhead adults originating from the Tilton River and the upper Cowlitz River basins and is designed to test for abundance, productivity and self-sustainability. Productivity is measured by determining the number of adults that return from the number of parents that laid their eggs. If at least one adult returns for each adult that spawned then a system is considered self-sustaining.

The productivity test began in 2010 with winter steelhead. No hatchery-origin winter steelhead were released into the Tilton River or upper Cowlitz basin during the testing period. The FTC recommended terminating the test in the upper Cowlitz River basins based on:

1. Construction of volitional upstream fish passage facilities at Mayfield Dam will continue to require the handling and transport of upper basin natural-origin fish. Fish would still need to be trapped and handled to be trucked around Mossyrock Dam.
2. The FTC considered there is a low likelihood of success of the current productivity test over the next 10 years, or until the timeline established in the

SA expires. Current productivity rates from natural-origin steelhead in the upper Cowlitz River basin are 0.16, well below the goal of 1.0.

3. There are ESA-listed salmonid populations in the upper Cowlitz River basin that need immediate recovery assistance. If productivity testing continues, delays in implementing significant recovery actions for these listed populations may result in lost opportunities to protect critical fisheries habitat, restore or enhance fisheries habitat or to conduct other recovery actions.

Do Tacoma Power and the FHMP have any programs aimed at supporting the sports fishing opportunities?

Yes. The Cowlitz salmon and trout hatcheries will continue to produce hatchery-origin fish that will be available for harvest as adults upon their return to freshwater. The salmon hatchery was extensively rebuilt to enable the rearing of healthier and heartier juveniles that should be able to better survive their outmigration and time in the ocean. Tacoma Power also continues to fund releases of about 100,000 catchable rainbow trout in the Cowlitz Project waters annually.

How does remodeling the salmon hatchery benefit fisheries on the Cowlitz River?

The rebuilding of the Cowlitz Salmon Hatchery, and improvements to the Cowlitz Trout Hatchery, creates better fish rearing conditions which should result in higher smolt-to-adult survival rates for hatchery-origin salmon and steelhead. The end result will be more hatchery fish returning to the Cowlitz River, thereby providing more fish for anglers to catch.

The remodeling of the hatchery improved the ability to control water temperatures, which allows smolts to be released at a time and a size more like the natural-origin populations in the river basin. This step should reduce the impact of being reared in the hatchery environment.

I have more questions. Who do I ask?

Tacoma Power is scheduling regular public meetings on Cowlitz fisheries issues in Lewis County. There will be meetings in March, April and September 2014. These meetings will be announced in local papers, on Tacoma Power web sites and on the www.cowlitzfish.net web site.

You can email questions directly to Tacoma Power's fisheries biologist at cowlitz@ci.tacoma.wa.us, or use the feedback link at www.cowlitzfish.net and your question will be answered.

It is a good idea to regularly check the www.cowlitzfish.net web site for news updates including announcements of public meetings, and links to other information regarding Cowlitz River fisheries plans.