

Regional Water Quality Control Board
North Coast Region
Executive Officer's Summary Report
August 19, 2021

ITEM: 6

SUBJECT: Informational Update on NOAA Fisheries' *Species in the Spotlight: Priority Action Plan for Central California Coast Coho Salmon Evolutionarily Significant Unit* and the Regional Water Board's Restoration Program (*Jake Shannon; Erin Seghesio, NOAA Fisheries*)

BOARD ACTION: This is an informational item only; no action will be taken by the Regional Water Board.

BACKGROUND: In 2015, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) launched the *Species in the Spotlight* initiative to provide immediate, targeted efforts to halt declines and stabilize populations, focus resources within and outside of NOAA on the most at-risk species, guide agency actions where NOAA Fisheries has discretion to make investments, increase public awareness and support for these species, and expand partnerships.

The criteria for *Species in the Spotlight* are that they are endangered, their populations are declining, and they are considered a recovery priority #1C. A recovery priority #1C species is one whose extinction is almost certain in the immediate future because of rapid population decline or habitat destruction, and because of conflicts with construction, development, or economic activity.

As of January 2021, nine species are identified in the *Species in the Spotlight*, including Central California Coast (CCC) coho salmon evolutionarily significant unit (ESU). This ESU includes naturally spawned coho salmon originating from rivers south of Punta Gorda in Humboldt County, down to Aptos Creek below Santa Cruz, as well as such coho salmon originating from tributaries to San Francisco Bay. CCC coho salmon were first listed as a threatened species in 1996 and subsequently reclassified as endangered in 2005. The CCC coho salmon populations for the southernmost extent of the species' range and this unique run of coho salmon has teetered on the brink of extinction. Populations reached extremely low levels during the height of California's recent extended drought (2011–2016), though some have rebounded in the past several years. Nevertheless, all populations remain depressed and well below recovery targets, particularly those in the most southern portion of the ESU, which are highly vulnerable to extinction and dependent on ongoing conservation hatchery programs (Spence 2021, in preparation).

DISCUSSION: Many of the North Coast Region's aquatic ecosystems - rivers, streams, lakes, reservoirs, wetlands, enclosed bays, and estuaries - are home to sensitive beneficial uses and at-risk species, including CCC coho salmon. The structure, function, and biodiversity of aquatic ecosystems are vulnerable to disruption, and often require proactive, restorative measures to correct impairment, prevent further degradation, or increase resilience. The North Coast Water Board supports the implementation of efforts that are designed to restore, protect, and enhance waters of the state.

In January 2015, the North Coast Water Board adopted the Policy in Support of Restoration in the North Coast Region – Resolution No. R1-2015-0001 (Restoration Policy). The Restoration Policy was subsequently approved by the State Water Resources Control Board and Office of Administrative Law, thereby incorporating it as an amendment to the Water Quality Control Plan for the North Coast Region.

The Restoration Policy is primarily a narrative expressing support for restoration activities and similar type projects. The Policy describes in detail: (1) the importance of restoration projects for the protection, enhancement and recovery of beneficial uses, (2) the obstacles that slow or preclude restoration actions, (3) the legal and procedural requirements for permitting restoration projects, (4) the ongoing Regional Water Board effort to provide support towards the implementation of restoration projects, and (5) direction to staff to continue to support restoration in the future.

The North Coast Water Board has cultivated a reputation of progressively and cooperatively working to support restoration actions throughout the region. In recent years, staff have coordinated with and supported restoration practitioners regionwide through streamlined permitting, grant funding, technical support, and more.

At the August 19, 2021 Regional Water Board meeting Erin Seghesio, NOAA Fisheries Recovery Coordinator/Fisheries Biologist, will present the recently released *Species in the Spotlight: Priority Action Plan for Central California Coast Coho Salmon Evolutionarily Significant Unit*. In addition, the Regional Water Board's Restoration Specialist, Jake Shannon will provide an update of the region's broad efforts to advance restoration actions and species recovery within the North Coast Region.

RECOMMENDATION: N/A This is an informational item only.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

1. NOAA Fisheries' Species in the Spotlight: Priority Action Plan for Central California Coast Coho Salmon Evolutionarily Significant Unit
<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/endangered-species-conservation/species-in-the-spotlight>
2. NOAA Fisheries' Central California Coho Species in the Spotlight Webpage
<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/species/coho-salmon-protected#spotlight>
3. Policy in Support of Restoration in the North Coast Region – Resolution No. R1-2015-0001
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/northcoast/water_issues/programs/basin_plan/restoration_policy/