



Monday, January 31, 2005

Last modified Monday, January 31, 2005 12:07 AM PST

Critical habitat proposed for steelhead trout

By Kirsten Flagg/Staff Writer

Steelhead trout may swim a little easier through Southern California's creeks and rivers this spring because of a proposed ruling that would add extra protection to 2,073 miles of fresh water throughout the region.

A proposal to designate critical habitat for steelhead trout and salmon across the West Coast will give conservationists another tool in efforts to restore the populations of these fish, according to federal officials and some environmental groups.

These designations will most likely be used to direct the planning of voluntary recovery efforts as opposed to adding any new regulations, said Mark Capelli, Southern California recovery coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service.

For instance, nonprofit groups active in restoring damaged habitat would be able to use the critical habitat designation to apply for national funding, Capelli said.

"What the studies have shown is that when a species is endangered and has critical habitat, it's more than twice as likely to be taken off the ESA (Environmental Species Act)," said Brian Trautwein, a biologist with the Santa Barbara-based Environmental Defense Center. "So that the species is plentiful and can be enjoyed by everybody."

However, some conservationists say the regulatory agency cast its net too tight by not including areas that were historically, but not presently, occupied by the fish - specifically the portion of the Santa Ynez River upstream from Bradbury Dam.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) proposes designating as critical habitat all rivers and creeks where steelhead live in San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties except for Zaca and Nojoqui Creeks in the Santa Ynez Valley and those creeks that run through military bases like Vandenberg Air Force Base.

In addition, NOAA asks for comments on whether waterways now blocked to the passage of steelhead trout by dams like Bradbury should also be considered for critical habitat designation because "the re-establishment of larger populations such as the one that historically occurred in the Santa Ynez River may be necessary to reduce the extinction probability" of this species of steelhead.

Like salmon, steelhead trout are "anadromous," meaning they are born in fresh water, migrate to the ocean and return years later to the same freshwater location to spawn.

"The purpose of the Endangered Species Act is to recover species, not to list them," said Jim Edmunson, the Southern California manager for California Trout, a conservation group lobbying the State Water Resources Board to require fish passage through Bradbury Dam. "And if we want to recover this species, then they need to recover access to where they were once allowed to go when populations numbered in the tens of thousands, not in the hundreds or less than a hundred."

The establishment of the critical habitats has already been awash with contention between environmentalists and the developers whose projects must submit to regulations related to the ESA.

NOAA published its first attempt at critical habitat designations in 2000, but was forced to repeal the ruling in 2002 due to a lawsuit by the National Association of Homebuilders, which claimed that the economic costs to agencies and developers potentially affected by the ruling had not been considered.

Another lawsuit was then filed by the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations alleging that NOAA had failed to redesignate critical habitat in a timely way, at which point the agency agreed to file new designations by 2004.

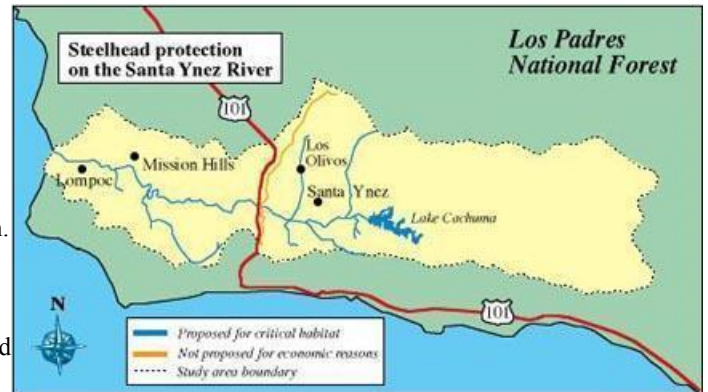
This new proposal does consider the economic costs associated with designations, but does not quantify any economic benefits of critical habitat, a decision that has garnered further criticism from environmental groups.

"It's pretty hard to monetize, turn into dollars, the biological part of this weighing equation, and the way we tried to do it was to look at (benefits) in biological terms," said Craig Wingert, NOAA Fisheries supervisory biologist.

Of the 12,800 miles of occupied waterways in California identified in the proposed ruling, about 1,200 ended up excluded from the critical habitat designation through this cost-benefit analysis.

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Jan. 31, 2005



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