

FORUM: Steelhead recovery for SoCal

By [Chris Yates](#) North County Times - Californian | Posted: Sunday, August 29, 2010

Recent articles in the local media attest to the strong interest in efforts to recover native steelhead trout in the rivers and streams of Southern California.

Steelhead are one of seven Pacific salmon species that are native to the west coast of North America and are an ocean-going form of rainbow trout. They migrate between the ocean and freshwater and use all portions of a river system, including the estuary at the mouth and the spawning and nursery areas in the headwaters, to complete their life cycle.

In 2002, steelhead south of Malibu Creek to the U.S.-Mexico border were listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The act requires that, subject to certain exceptions, a recovery plan be prepared for the conservation and survival of each listed species. In general, a recovery plan identifies specific threats, recovery actions to address them, and criteria necessary to conclude that the species can be removed from the endangered species list.

The Southern California steelhead recovery planning area in Orange and San Diego Counties includes the major watersheds of San Juan Creek, Santa Margarita, San Luis Rey, San Dieguito, and Sweetwater Rivers, and San Mateo Creeks.

Historically steelhead have been an important sport fishing species. Prior to their decline by the mid-20th century, steelhead runs in Southern California were conservatively estimated at 55,000 annually. Today, the runs have been reduced to 500 or fewer spawning adults. Remnant runs of steelhead and the resident rainbow trout continue to persist within major rivers of Southern California, although their existence is precarious at best.

There is no single factor responsible for the sharp decline of Southern California steelhead. However, degradation and loss of their freshwater spawning and rearing habitat has been identified as some of the primary causes for decline.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service is in the process of finalizing a draft recovery plan with the assistance of public review and comment. The final recovery plan will serve as a guide for those interested in restoring steelhead runs within Southern California. The final recovery plan will not be a regulatory document, but a blueprint which describes the unique biological characteristics of Southern California steelhead.

It will identify the threats which have brought them to the brink of extinction, the types of restoration actions which will allow steelhead runs to increase to a level that allow their removal from the list of endangered species, set out a general strategy for recovering individual watersheds with specific goals, and provide an estimate of the time and cost of recovery actions that can be used in planning, applying for grants and securing funding. As required by the act, the recovery plan will identify measures to restore the natural habitats which have supported steelhead. The plan does not call for restoring the ecosystem to the conditions present before human impacts. It does propose some logical habitat improvements that would develop better conditions for steelhead and other

species. High-priority recovery actions include the removal of in-stream barriers that impede the passage of fish, the provision of appropriate seasonal flows of water, the control of point and nonpoint waste discharges, the removal of non-native species, the restoration of vegetation in riparian areas, the management of wildfires, the control of erosion, and the restoration of coastal estuaries.

As a result of these diverse recovery actions, the Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan will also contribute to the protection and restoration of a wide variety of other native species in addition to steelhead. In many cases these recovery actions are consistent with other local, regional, and state programs intended to restore watershed health and therefore the vital role coastal watersheds play in the communities of Southern California. For example the plan does not call for continuous water flow in systems where water was only present infrequently. It does propose that water management consider steelhead to provide for some migration opportunities.

For the last three years NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service has reached out to local coastal communities, including those in the San Luis Rey River watershed, to develop a plan to recover Southern California steelhead. There has been an exceptional response and participation from a wide variety of interested parties, from those who would like to see a restored recreational steelhead fishery in local watersheds to those concerned about managing limited water resources.

The draft Southern California Steelhead Recovery Plan is the first attempt to take a comprehensive look at the plight of Southern California steelhead and identify both limitations and the opportunities to protect and restore an important part of California's natural heritage.

Because a recovery plan does not mandate specific recovery actions, implementation of the final plan, and ultimately the recovery of the species, depends on the cooperation of local, regional, and state governments, Native American tribes, and individual citizens. NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service's primary role in the implementation of the plan is to promote and refine the recovery strategy and provide needed technical assistance and information to other groups carrying out actions that may affect the species and its prospects for recovery.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service is committed to working cooperatively with all interested stakeholders and encourages their participation in the recovery planning process.

For more information on the Southern California steelhead recovery planning efforts please contact jim.milbury@noaa.gov or see a summary of the draft recovery plan at: http://swr.nmfs.noaa.gov/recovery/So_Cal/Recovery_Plan_Summary_Final-080509.pdf Chris Yates is the Assistant Regional Administrator for Protected Resources in NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, Southwest Region. In this role he is responsible for the implementation of the Endangered Species Act and Marine Mammal Protection Act in the State of California.

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