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Upper Klamath River Chinook Salmon One Step Closer to Protection Under Endangered Species Act

PORTLAND, *Ore.* — In response to a petition from, the Center for Biological Diversity, Oregon Wild, Environmental Protection Information Center and Larch Company, the National Marine Fisheries Service today determined that upper Klamath River Chinook salmon found in northern California and southern Oregon may warrant protection under the federal Endangered Species Act and initiated a status review to determine if protection is warranted.

“Today’s decision acknowledges the devastating declines experienced by Klamath River Chinook in the face of a century of dam building, logging, hatcheries and other insults to this globally important river and salmon run,” said Noah Greenwald, endangered species director at the Center for Biological Diversity. “Wild Chinook salmon in the Klamath need the protection of the Endangered Species Act to survive,”

The petition requested protection first and foremost for spring-run Chinook, once the most abundant run of Klamath Chinook, now near extinction. Biologists now count just 300 to 3,000 wild-spawning spring Chinook each year. These fish are marvels of evolution, living most of their lives in the Pacific Ocean only to return to the river in the spring with enough fat reserves to survive without eating until early fall when it’s time for them to spawn. They have long been prized as one of the best-tasting salmon species and historically the most economically important Klamath fish.

“The spring-run Chinook have become the Klamath’s sad little secret,” said Ani Kame’enui, a Klamath wildlife advocate with Oregon Wild. “Everyone from fisheries biologists to local anglers knows that springers are suffering, but we often turn a blind eye. The protections sought in this petition are about finally doing something to stop the bleeding.”

The Klamath Basin was once the third-largest producer of salmon and steelhead on the West Coast, but now produces fewer and fewer wild fish as a result of dams, habitat degradation and other factors. Overall, at least 300 miles of spawning habitat in the Klamath Basin have been made inaccessible by dams. Because of declines in the overall numbers of returning wild

Chinook, the petition also asks the Fisheries Service to consider protecting wild fall-run Chinook.

“The Klamath River Basin and the salmon it supports are a national treasure,” said Andrew Orahoske, conservation director for the Environmental Protection Information Center. “So far, federal agencies have managed spring-run Chinook in the Klamath by ignoring them. Plans for the restoration of the Klamath need to put spring Chinook recovery front and center.”

Recent river management has exacerbated the Chinook’s plight. In the fall of 2002, Klamath River Chinook suffered one of the worst fish kills in Northwest history when as many as 70,000 adult salmon died before spawning. Excessive water withdrawals, primarily from the federally run Klamath Irrigation Project, resulted in low flows and warm water temperatures that allowed disease to develop and spread quickly. Continued low flows and warm temperatures are key drivers of an ongoing disease crisis in the river that has sharply reduced survival of juvenile wild fish on their way to the ocean.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 315,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

Since 1974, Oregon Wild has worked to protect and restore Oregon’s wildlands, wildlife, and waters as an enduring legacy for future generations.

The Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) works to protect and restore ancient forests, watersheds, coastal estuaries, and native species in Northern California. EPIC uses an integrated, science-based approach, combining public education, citizen advocacy, and strategic litigation.

The Larch Company is a for-profit, non-membership conservation organization that represents species who cannot talk and the human generations to come.

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