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Idaho groups seek end of sockeye salmon barging program

Boise—A consortium of Idaho conservation groups this week called on the federal government to end barging of sockeye salmon, a practice they said is clearly bad for Idaho’s most imperiled and endangered salmon.

In a letter to NOAA Fisheries and the Army Corps of Engineers—the two key agencies in charge of fish passage at dams on the Snake and Columbia rivers—the groups said artificial transportation of endangered sockeye interferes with the fish’s homing ability, making them even more vulnerable to hot water when they return as adults.”

In 2015, some 95 percent of Idaho’s returning adult sockeye salmon were killed before reaching Idaho by two months of steady hot water in the Columbia and Snake rivers. Idaho’s sockeye salmon are the species most at risk of extinction, and any measures we can take to bolster survival are imperative.

“This request is based on NOAA’s own science,” said IRU Executive Director Kevin Lewis. “That science says sockeye that are hauled around dams in barges have a smaller chance of surviving than those left in the river to migrate on their own.”

The interested conservation groups include IRU, Friends of the Clearwater, Idaho Sierra Club, Idaho Conservation League, Idaho Wildlife Federation, Snake River Waterkeeper and a north Idaho chapter of Trout Unlimited.

Sockeye salmon were listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act 26 years ago, in 1991, and 25 years ago a lone sockeye salmon dubbed Lonesome Larry returned to Redfish Lake in central Idaho, drawing attention to the plight of Idaho’s salmon from around the nation.

“Since the 1990s when sockeye populations consistently hovered in the single digits fish biologists have prevented extinction of the species through a captive broodstock program run by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, but this iconic species is still in big trouble,” said Sierra Club Idaho Director Zack Waterman. “Instead of employing actions like barging, which works against recovery, we should be focusing more on measures like spilling water at the dams, a practice proven to help fish.”

The bottom line is that the more the river system works like a river, the better wild salmon do.

"Idaho's wild salmon are an iconic species to this state, and as water temperatures continue to rise, they are at immediate risk," said Idaho Conservation League Community Engagement Associate Lana Weber. "With an above average snowpack this year, we have the opportunity to use management techniques to help these fish make it to the ocean in good health so more will return home to Idaho as adults."

Snake River Waterkeeper Executive Director Buck Ryan said agencies should stop manipulating natural processes in an attempt to recover wild salmon.

“The fish simply need an environment with minimal interference so they can survive and spawn,” he said. “Barging smolts downstream and trucking them back upriver as spawning adults disrupts natural selection, precludes accurate assessment of population viability and continues practices that have salmon teetering on the brink.”

Barging was never meant to be a permanent fix, said Idaho Wildlife Federation Executive Director Brian Brooks.

“Spilling more water at the dams more accurately represents the sockeye's natural river migration and, especially after wet winters like this one, eliminates the need for barging,” Brooks said. “It's time to seriously evaluate alternative solutions instead of relying on the expensive transport methods of damaging artificial migration.”

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