

South-Central California Coast Steelhead Maintain Threatened Listing Status

Prolonged drought and passage barriers reflect urgency of species recovery actions



South-Central California Steelhead – San Carpoforo Creek, San Luis Obispo County. Photo: Mark H. Capelli, NOAA Fisheries.

By NOAA Fisheries

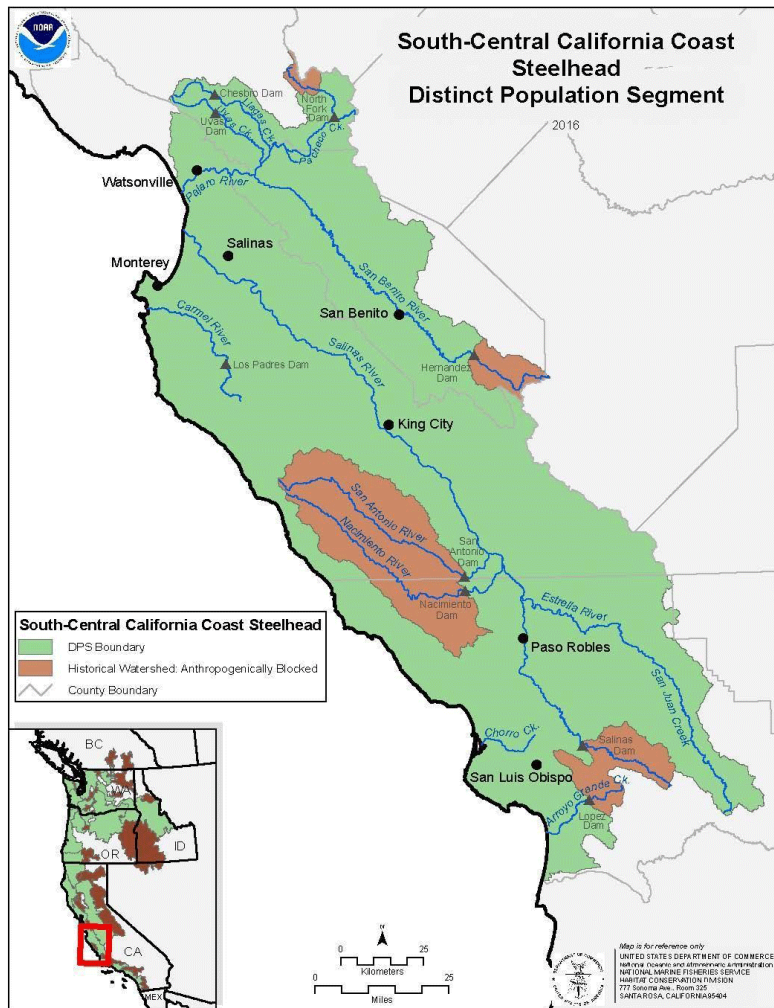
NOAA Fisheries' 2023 five-year review has found the steelhead populations (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*) of the south-central California coast warrant continued protection as a threatened species under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Remnant populations of steelhead occupy watersheds from the Pajaro River in Monterey County south to Arroyo Grande Creek.

The south-central California coast includes the Salinas River (one of the largest watersheds in California) and numerous small streams along the Big Sur Coast. Populations in the larger watersheds, including the Pajaro, Carmel, Salinas, and Arroyo Grande have suffered the largest declines of steelhead runs. Some sparsely developed watersheds along the Big Sur Coast and in northern San Luis Obispo County continue to support annual runs of steelhead, and a small catch-and-release sports fishery. This southernmost steelhead fishery in California is tightly regulated by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Continued threats to south-central California steelhead populations require comprehensive conservation action to recover these at-risk populations.

“We are at a crucial point where we can still help improve the resilience of the species to climate change, but that time is running out,” said Lisa Van Atta, Assistant Regional Administrator in NOAA Fisheries' West Coast Region.



The 5-year review highlights the declining population trends in response to drought conditions in all four Biogeographic Population Groups within south-central California and wildfires along the Big Sur Coast. It also looks at the impact from cannabis cultivation operations which have withdrawn water from many smaller streams.

A wide variety of alterations to the watersheds in south-Central California have led to sharp declines in steelhead populations. This is particularly important in the larger watersheds -- Pajaro, Carmel, Salinas, and Arroyo Grande -- with extensive water supply developments such as dams.

The prolonged drought in south-Central California from 2012 through 2017 has exacerbated the impacts of water

supply and related land development on remnant steelhead populations. That has increased the urgency of the recovery actions identified in NOAA Fisheries' 2013 *South-Central California Coast Steelhead Recovery Plan*.

“The small steelhead populations along the central coast have continued to persist through a record drought, but some populations with restricted access to historic spawning habitat have been hit hard,” said Mark Capelli, recovery coordinator for the species. “With the support and cooperation of CDFW and others, removal of fish passage barriers should increase the resilience of these populations and move them towards recovery.”

The review also summarizes the implementation of these actions. They include:

- New fish passage and screening projects
- Alternative water supply projects
- Flood control and sediment management projects to reduce impacts to steelhead rearing habitats

New research has also provided insights into the biology and habitat requirements of the species, which will better direct recovery actions. Priority recovery actions include:

- Removing or modifying dams and other fish passage barriers
- Restoring flows in mainstems and tributaries
- Managing sediment and flood control activities
- Restoring riparian and estuary habitats
- Reducing excessive groundwater extractions for agriculture and urban uses

The South-Central California Coast Steelhead five-year review is one of [28 reviews of West Coast salmon and steelhead species](#) by NOAA Fisheries’ West Coast Region. The Endangered Species Act calls for a review of listed species at least every five years to determine if their listing status remains accurate or should be changed. The reviews also provide a report card on recovery, as outlined by each species’ recovery plan. The reviews identify the most critical threats to the species and recommend key conservation actions that can increase the species’ likelihood of recovery.