Summary

Meeting dates: Sept 8-9, 2017

Agenda item: Elwha Fishing Moratorium and Fish Status Update – (Briefing/Tour)

Presenter(s): Joe Anderson, Research Scientist and Annette Hoffmann Region 6 Fish Program Manager

Background summary:

From September 2011 to summer 2014, two dams on the Elwha River were removed, restoring free-flowing river conditions and anadromous fish access to over 70 miles of habitat for the first time in a century. The project, which was the largest dam removal in U.S. history, presented immense opportunity for long term recovery of depleted Elwha fish populations, but also exposed fish to hostile spawning and rearing conditions due to the release of sediment from the former reservoirs. As a result, managers have taken actions to ensure stock persistence and promote recolonization of spawning and rearing habitats upstream of the former dam sites.

Concurrent with dam removal, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe and the National Park Service implemented a five-year moratorium on fisheries targeting Elwha stocks in March 2012. This unique three party agreement was intended to reduce extinction risk during the period when fish stocks were threatened by sediment released from the former reservoir sites and to maximize the potential for recolonization by low abundance populations. Upon reviewing the status of fish populations this past spring, the three parties extended the fishing moratorium through June 1 2019.

An interagency, collaborative monitoring team composed of scientists from the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, Olympia National Park, NOAA Fisheries, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the United States Geological Survey and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is employing a variety of methods to track the response of salmon habitat and to dam removal. At this point, the massive physical disturbance associated with dam removal has subsided, as the largest magnitude of sediment erosion and transport downstream is mostly complete. However, although biological surveys have shown that some anadromous fish species have accessed spawning grounds upstream of the dam sites, abundance and productivity of Elwha salmonids remains low.

Elwha fish monitoring data are compared to a series of populations benchmarks guiding adaptive management of salmon and steelhead stocks through sequential phases of recovery. Populations have not yet reached recovery objectives. It is expected that fishing will resume when abundance allows for a harvestable surplus.

Policy issue(s) you are bringing to the Commission for consideration:

NA - briefing and public hearing only.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

The initial moratorium proposed in 2011 called for a complete fishing closure throughout the entire Elwha watershed. However, at a public meeting held in Port Angeles prior to the moratorium, anglers expressed a desire for some opportunity in the watershed. As a result, WDFW modified the moratorium proposal to allow for fishing in Lake Sutherland from the fourth Saturday in April through October 31 of each year. This fishing opportunity has been maintained with the recent two-year extension of the Elwha Fishing Moratorium.

Action requested:

None at this time.

Draft motion language:

None at this time.

Justification for Commission action:

This action is justified under RCW 77.12.047.

Communications Plan:

The public was advised of the two-year extension of the Elwha Fishing Moratorium via a press release issued on March 31 2017:

http://wdfw.wa.gov/news/mar3117a/