

Summary Sheet

Meeting dates: April 5-6, 2019

Agenda item: Status Review of the Pinto Abalone (Public Hearing)

Presenter(s): Chris Eardley, Puget Sound Shellfish Policy Coordinator
Henry Carson, Fish & Wildlife Research Scientist

Background summary:

Pinto abalone are iconic marine snails prized as food and for their beautiful shells. A state recreational fishery started in 1959, with closure in 1994 due to signs of overharvest. Populations have continued to decline since the closure, most likely due to illegal harvest and densities too low for reproduction to occur. Populations at monitoring sites declined 97% from 1992 – 2017. The ten sites originally held 359 individuals and now hold 12. Average size of the remnant individuals continues to increase and wild juveniles have not been sighted in ten years, indicating an aging population with little reproduction in the wild. The species is under active restoration by the department and its partners to prevent local extinction. Since 2009 we have placed over 15,000 hatchery-raised juvenile abalone on sites in the San Juan Islands. Federal listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) was evaluated in 2014 but retained the “species of concern” designation only. Subpopulations of invertebrates cannot be listed separately under the ESA, and the committee did not find that the species was in danger throughout its range from Alaska to California. The Canadian population of pinto abalone has been listed as endangered since 2009 under their ESA-equivalent.

Staff recommendation:

The department has conducted a preliminary status review and have recommended pinto abalone be added to the state endangered species list. This public hearing will conclude the public comment period on that preliminary recommendation.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

Judging from public comment to date and scientific peer review of the preliminary recommendation, the final recommendation is likely to remain that this species warrants listing as endangered.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

The cost of implementing the listing itself will be minimal as the abalone biologist position who will develop the required recovery plan is already funded. Achieving the recovery goals for the species outlined in the recovery plan, however, will likely require considerable investment.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

The department has solicited input on the preliminary status review from interested parties including the treaty tribes, universities, marine resource committees, commercial shellfish harvesters, recreational scuba divers, aquaria, ports, and the public. This has included eight public presentations around the Puget Sound. Nearly all public comment has been enthusiastically in support of listing, including letters of support from the Northwest Straits Commission, SeaDoc Society, Friends of the San Juans, San Juan County Commissioners, Island County Commissioners, and Skagit County Marine Resource Committee. The preliminary status report has been peer reviewed by three experts in the field, and their recommendations will be used to write the final status report.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

None, hearing only. The commission will be asked to review and determine this species' status once the final status report has been distributed and available to the public for at least 30 days.

Draft motion language:

N/A, hearing only

Post decision communications plan:

N/A, hearing only
