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Catch-and-release steelhead fishery will not open on Skagit, Sauk rivers amid projected low returns

Catch-and-release steelhead fishery will not open on Skagit, Sauk rivers amid projected low returns

Date

Jan 14, 2020

Contact

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OLYMPIA – With low numbers of wild steelhead projected to return to the Skagit Basin, fishery managers with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) announced today that the Skagit steelhead catch-and-release fishery will not open this year.

Only 3,963 wild adult steelhead are expected to return to the Skagit Basin this year from Puget Sound.

Wild Puget Sound steelhead have been listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) since 2007. When projected returns to the Skagit Basin are below 4,000 fish, the number of allowable impacts to those fish is substantially restricted, said Edward Eleazer, regional fish program manager for WDFW.

“When returns are this low, our management plan and the ESA permit require us to be extremely conservative with how these fish might be impacted by fishing activity,” Eleazer said. “We have to minimize those impacts to ensure we meet conservation objectives, and to allow for other fisheries that don’t target steelhead in the Skagit and Sauk rivers and Puget Sound.”





Most of the steelhead returning in 2020 are 4 or 5 years old, and the low returns are likely the result of severe drought and low river flows in 2015 and 2016, as well as an unprecedented marine heatwave in the Pacific Ocean that negatively affected survival rates.

The Skagit Basin was closed to wild steelhead fishing for several years before reopening for limited fisheries on the Skagit and Sauk rivers in 2018 and 2019. WDFW worked with tribal co-managers to develop a fishery plan and secure an ESA fishery permit to reopen.

WDFW and the tribes continue working to recover wild steelhead, protect habitat, and remove fish passage barriers to improve survival in Puget Sound.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is the state agency tasked with preserving, protecting, and perpetuating fish, wildlife, and ecosystems, while providing sustainable fishing, hunting, and other recreation opportunities.

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