State of Oregon
Department of Environmental Quality Memorandum

Date: November 23, 2009

To: Environmental Quality Commission

From: Suzanne Knapp, Governor's Natural Resources Office

Subject: Agenda item D, informational item: Oregon's Middle Columbia River Steelhead Conservation and Recovery Plan
December 10-11, 2009 EQC meeting

Purpose This item will inform the Environmental Quality Commission about the Conservation and Recovery Plan for Endangered Species Act-listed Middle Columbia Steelhead, and the supportive role of the Department of Environmental Quality to help implement this plan for recovery.

Background The State of Oregon has completed its Middle Columbia River Steelhead Conservation and Recovery Plan, as required by the federal Endangered Species Act and the State's Native Fish Conservation Policy. While the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission still needs to approve Oregon's Conservation and Recovery Plan, NOAA Fisheries adopted the full bi-state plan in late September 2009. The Middle Columbia steelhead "distinct population segment" was first listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1999 and reaffirmed in January 2006.

The Conservation and Recovery Plan serves as a blueprint for the recovery of ten Middle Columbia steelhead populations that occupy Oregon tributaries to the Columbia River, which include Fifteenmile Creek, Deschutes, John Day, Umatilla and Walla Walla river basins. The plan seeks to remove or minimize threats to long-term persistence of these populations and improve their viability to levels that will allow removal of the steelhead distinct population segment from the threatened and endangered species list. Oregon's long-term and higher goal, termed broad sense recovery, is to recover these populations and their habitats to levels that provide sustainable fisheries and other ecological, cultural, social, and economic benefits for current and future generations.

Strategies and actions to achieve viability and broad sense recovery focus primarily on addressing threats to the populations posed by tributary habitat degradation, out-of- distinct population segment hatchery strays, and hydrosystem development and operations – considered the main obstacles to recovery. These threats affect the full life cycle of steelhead from egg to adult. Improvement of overall tributary habitat conditions will require many years of passive and active measures to protect the highest quality habitats, maintain existing unimpaired

habitats and ecosystem function, and restore healthy habitat conditions. Research, monitoring and evaluation will provide status and trend information, assess effectiveness of actions, and clarify uncertainties to support adaptive management and allow managers to make sound decisions.

Discussion

The Department of Environmental Quality will play an important role in helping to address the limiting factors associated with degraded and impaired water quality, including high temperatures, low dissolved oxygen, nutrients, suspended fine sediment, pesticides, herbicides, heavy metals and other toxic pollutants. Degraded water quality affects egg-to-smolt survival, smolt migration, adult migration, and pre-spawning viability. DEQ has many programs that support strategies for habitat management and improvement. Implementation of TMDLs, for example, is an important component to improving water quality in the various watersheds. Effective implementation of these programs and associated monitoring will be critical to addressing limiting factors, tracking changes, and significantly improving the quality of water in the Mid-Columbia river basins in the years ahead.

Under the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds, the State of Oregon is reliant on the actions and programs of many natural resource agencies synergistically working together to improve watershed and water quality conditions. Rebuilding natural, healthy, and diverse steelhead populations in the middle Columbia River basin is a priority for the State of Oregon, with the belief that citizens value and enjoy the substantial benefits productive and abundant populations of steelhead provide.

EQC Involvement

This informational item is an opportunity for the EQC to learn about the Middle Columbia River Steelhead Conservation and Recovery Plan that will require DEQ action and support.