

6/16/09 | 7 comments

Endangered Atlantic Salmon

Federal designation extended to Maine’s Penobscot, Kennebec, Androscoggin rivers

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY KATE COLLINS
Kevin Gallant, conservation aide with the Maine Department of Marine Resources, prepares an Atlantic salmon caught in the Veazie Dam trap for transport to the Craig Brook National Fish Hatchery in Orland on Monday. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Monday that they plan to add all Atlantic salmon populations in the Penobscot, Kennebec and Androscoggin rivers to the Endangered Species List. Atlantic salmon in eight smaller Maine rivers and the lower stretches of the Penobscot and Kennebec rivers were listed as endangered in 2000. **Buy Photo**

AUGUSTA, Maine — Federal officials announced Monday that they plan to add Atlantic salmon populations in the Penobscot, Kennebec and Androscoggin rivers to the Endangered Species List.

The decision significantly expands the previous “endangered” designation for Gulf of Maine salmon to include much of the watersheds of the state’s three largest and most heavily industrialized rivers. Salmon reared at two federal fish hatcheries also will be protected beginning next month.

Salmon from eight smaller Maine rivers and the lower stretches of the Penobscot and Kennebec have been listed as endangered since 2000.

Additionally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration plan to designate 12,000 miles of river, stream and estuary habitat and 300 square miles of lake habitat in Maine as critical habitat for salmon. Such a designation means any projects within that area receiving federal permits or federal money must

undergo additional oversight.

The designation is not expected to affect recreational fishing for other species within the watersheds, federal officials said.

Although widely expected, the endangered decision was nonetheless denounced by Maine’s congressional delegation, which worried the announcement could diminish the spirit of cooperation among parties. Gov. John Baldacci, who had been pushing for a less-restrictive designation of “threatened,” said the state will explore all options, including legal action.



“This federal action ignores Maine’s strong track record in species management and our need for a flexible approach which will enable us to use all our tools to work with stakeholders to manage Atlantic salmon,” Baldacci said in a statement. “The extreme approach chosen by the federal government hamstrings the state’s ability to use creative conservation efforts that have been successful in the past.”

Federal officials acknowledged Monday that the designation will affect hydropower facilities, development and other industries located throughout the three watersheds. But they pledged to work with the state and businesses to minimize those impacts.

In some cases, dams will need new or improved fish ladders or lifts to allow the salmon to pass upstream unharmed. Some dams will likely have to apply for “incidental take permits” to protect them from legal action if salmon are trapped or harmed.

Current conservation efforts, including an unprecedented \$50 million project under way to remove two Penobscot River dams and bypass a third, were taken into consideration. But federal officials believe more protections are needed.

“Our goal and our responsibility under the law is to help the Atlantic salmon recover from the brink of extinction,” Marvin Moriarty, acting deputy director for the USFWS, said during a conference call with reporters. “The state of Maine is a long-term partner of ours, and we will continue to work with them closely.”

Moriarty said recreational fishing for other species in the Penobscot and its tributaries should not be affected unless the agencies start to see those fisheries affecting salmon.

The state can receive a permit to shield recreational anglers — such as those vying for smallmouth bass in the Penobscot — from any penalties should they accidentally hook a salmon.

The days of catch-and-release fishing for sea-run salmon on the Penobscot are likely gone, however. Maine officials abruptly canceled a monthlong spring season near Bangor due to the impending decision.

“I think closing that door is not a wise choice for the federal agencies given the fact that anglers have done so much for conservation on the Penobscot,” said Andy Goode, vice president for U.S. operations at the Atlantic Salmon Federation, which had preferred a “threatened” designation. Labeling the fish as endangered, Goode said, could ostracize the community that has worked hard to protect salmon habitat and raise money for conservation.

Nonetheless, Goode added, “we recognize that the species is in trouble. We think the listing is warranted.”

During public hearings, several conservation and sporting groups testified in support of an endangered designation.

Before industrialization, salmon returned every year by the hundreds of thousands to New England rivers. But dams, pollution, overfishing and, more recently, low at-sea survival have virtually wiped out wild Atlantic salmon stocks in the U.S.

The lone glimmer of hope is the Penobscot. More than 2,000 salmon returned to the Penobscot in 2008, and this year's run is keeping pace with last year.

Even those promising figures, however, are only about 10 percent of the number biologists say is needed for salmon to survive on their own. And the vast majority of the sea-run salmon that return can be traced to the Green Lake and Craig Brook salmon hatcheries.

"The goal of the Endangered Species Act is to have natural, self-sustaining populations," said Mary Colligan, director of protected resources with NOAA's northeast fisheries service.

But Patrick Keliher, director of Maine's Bureau of Sea-Run Fisheries and Habitat, contends that the decision on Maine's salmon appears to be driven, in part, by policies adopted in response to lawsuits over salmon on the West Coast. Keliher said that cooperation among all parties, not regulation, is the best option in Maine.

"We look at this as a population that is without a doubt threatened and that could become endangered if we don't work cooperatively on the conservation of the species," Keliher said.

Don Foster, a past president of the Penobscot Salmon Club and a member of the Maine Council of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, personally believes that a threatened designation would have kept the angling community enthused while protecting the fish. Now, Foster worries the salmon clubs that have played such a large role in recent conservation efforts could go the same way as the fish.

"I really fear this may be the end as we know it for salmon clubs because there is no more hope for fishing for many of the members in their lifetimes," Foster said.