

California, Oregon coastal Chinook Salmon move closer to Endangered Species Protection

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In response to a petition by the Native Fish Society, Center for Biological Diversity and Umpqua Watersheds, the National Marine Fisheries Service determined today that the Oregon Coast and southern Oregon/Northern California Coast Chinook salmon may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act.

“I’m pleased that Chinook salmon in Oregon and Northern California are that much closer to being protected under the Endangered Species Act,” said Meg Townsend, freshwater attorney at the Center. “These giants among Pacific salmon are irreplaceable icons of the Pacific Northwest. Chinooks bring important nutrients from the ocean to our forests, feed endangered Southern Resident orcas, and are a source of food and admiration for communities up and down the coast.”

Chinook are anadromous, returning from the ocean to the freshwater streams where they were born to reproduce. The Oregon and California Chinook salmon populations contain both early and late-run variants,

otherwise known as spring-run and fall-run Chinook salmon.

Spring-run Chinook salmon enter coastal rivers from the ocean in the spring and migrate upstream as they mature, holding in deep pools in rivers through the summer, and spawning in early fall in the upper reaches of watersheds. Conversely, fall-run Chinook enter the rivers in the fall and spawn shortly thereafter.

Spring-run Chinook in Oregon and Northern California suffer from chronically low abundance. These fish have specific habitat needs, and there are numerous unaddressed threats to every population and their habitat in Oregon and Northern California.

“Over the past 15 years, I have personally witnessed South Umpqua Spring Chinook disappear,” said Stanley Petrowski, river advocate and member of both Umpqua Watersheds and Native Fish Society. “It is my hope that the National Marine Fisheries Service identifies the ecological disaster and provides solutions to restore freshwater habitats, decrease predation and rein in commercial offshore fishing to restore these iconic South Umpqua fish before it is too late.”

Historical records indicate that spring Chinook were once present in almost all watersheds of the Oregon and Northern California coastal range. Their combined former ranges include 11 river systems between Tillamook Bay and the Klamath River: the Tillamook, Nestucca, Siletz, Alsea, Siuslaw, North Umpqua, South Umpqua, Coos, Coquille, Rogue and Smith. The Coos and Siuslaw populations, as well as a former population in the Salmon River, have disappeared.

“Spring Chinook numbers have plummeted in the past 20 or so years and they represent an important component of life history and genetic diversity within coastal Chinook populations,” said Liz Perkin, north Oregon regional coordinator at Native Fish Society. “That diversity must be protected to ensure the long-term survival of all coastal Chinook, which is what we're hoping to achieve with this petition.”

In August 2022 the Center, Native Fish Society and Umpqua Watersheds petitioned for Endangered Species Act protection for Oregon coast and Southern Oregon/Northern California coast Chinook salmon. The Service will conduct a formal status review of the species to determine whether listing is warranted.