



# A VISION for SALMON and STEELHEAD

## Goals to Restore Thriving Salmon and Steelhead to the Columbia River Basin

Phase 1 Report of the Columbia Basin Partnership Task Force  
of the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee

## Executive Summary

**T**his report presents a unique voice for the future of salmon and steelhead of the Columbia River Basin. These fish are an integral feature of the Columbia River landscape, culture, and economy and represent the lifeblood of the Columbia Basin. Preserving the fish for future generations is one of the greatest challenges we face today.

Over the past two years, the 28 members of the Columbia Basin Partnership Task Force (Task Force), representing a diversity of managers and stakeholders across the Columbia Basin, have worked diligently and sincerely to develop a shared vision and goals for Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead. The Task Force forwarded these goals as recommendations to the NOAA Fisheries Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee (MAFAC) for their consideration in April 2019. MAFAC reviewed, discussed, and recommended these goals and the full report for submission to the NOAA Fisheries Administrator.

Great runs of salmon and steelhead historically returned to the Columbia River Basin. Estimated at between five and 16 million fish, they returned each year like clockwork to spawn across the vast Columbia landscape. Numbers began to decline in the late 1800s with the advancement of European settlement and continued to drop into the late 1900s. Today, the annual runs average just over two million fish, of which only 40 percent are naturally produced. The rest come from hatchery programs developed as natural production declined. Since 1992, more than half of Columbia River salmon and steelhead species have been listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA). Tremendous effort and hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested in the Basin over the last 50 years to stem the decline and attempt to rebuild the runs to healthy levels. Results to date are mixed. Many runs remain at low levels; none have been delisted.

Considering the continuing challenges in sustaining the fish, NOAA Fisheries commissioned an independent, impartial assessment in 2010 to gain advice on how best to approach comprehensive, long-term salmon and steelhead recovery in the region. The Situation Assessment, completed in 2012, reflected the views of more than 200 stakeholders, including federal, state, and tribal managers and other parties interested in salmon and steelhead recovery. Important recommendations came from this assessment: getting to recovery will require creative, bold, and effective actions at multiple levels; it will also demand attention to interdependent legal, regulatory, ecological, social, cultural, and economic elements. In particular, the Situation Assessment highlighted the lack of common goals in multiple overlapping federal, state, and tribal recovery and management plans and that effective recovery processes need to include a shared regional definition of success.

The Task Force grew out of these recommendations. Convened by NOAA Fisheries and MAFAC in 2017, the Task Force represents an unprecedented collaboration of parties representing environmental, fishing, agricultural, utility, and river-user interests; local recovery groups; the states of Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon; and federally recognized tribes in the region. These parties share overlapping and sometimes conflicting values and views about the Columbia River and its salmon and steelhead. In the past, many of the parties faced each other from opposite sides of a courtroom. The Task Force brought these representatives together at one table for the first time to find common ground and foster a collaborative approach to ensure the long-term persistence of our salmon and steelhead.

Through the Task Force process, these interests have arrived at a shared purpose and vision for future generations.

<sup>1</sup> Sources: Northwest Power and Conversation Council's 1987 Fish and Wildlife Program <https://www.nwcouncil.org/fish-and-wildlife/previous-programs/1987-columbia-river-basin-fishwildlife-program> and Appendix D of the program "Compilation of Salmon and Steelhead Losses in the Columbia River Basin, March 1986": <https://www.nwcouncil.org/sites/default/files/AppendixDLosses.pdf>; and ISAB report 2015-1: [https://www.nwcouncil.org/sites/default/files/isab2015-1\\_0.pdf](https://www.nwcouncil.org/sites/default/files/isab2015-1_0.pdf)

## Vision for the Columbia Basin

*A healthy Columbia River Basin ecosystem with thriving salmon and steelhead that are indicators of clean and abundant water, reliable and clean energy, a robust regional economy, and vibrant cultural and spiritual traditions, all interdependent and existing in harmony.*

The Task Force developed **Qualitative Goals** and Provisional Quantitative Goals that reflect the vision. The Qualitative Goals are:

1. Restore salmon and steelhead in the Columbia Basin to healthy and harvestable/fishable levels.
2. Provide diverse, productive, and dependable tribal and non-tribal harvest and fishing opportunities for Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead in fresh and marine waters.
3. Produce hatchery salmon and steelhead to support conservation, mitigate for lost natural production, and support fisheries in a manner that strategically aligns hatchery production with natural production recovery goals.
4. Make decisions within a broader context that reflects and considers effects to the full range of social, cultural, economic, and ecosystem values and diversity in the Columbia Basin.

The Task Force sees both the need and opportunity to act today while at the same time envisioning salmon and steelhead runs 100 years from now. They recognize the sense of urgency to help Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead, the people and communities that rely on them, and the wild-life, such as Southern Resident killer whales, that depend on them for survival.

The Task Force's **Provisional Quantitative Goals** describe a range of abundance numbers for salmon and steelhead that indicate whether a Qualitative Goal has been achieved. Provisional Quantitative Goals are identified for natural production of all ESA-listed and non-listed salmon and steelhead in the U.S. portion of the Columbia River Basin and its tributaries, including some historical production areas that are currently blocked. The goals are based, wherever possible, on existing goals and take into account a number of factors, including ESA delisting requirements, habitat constraints and production potential, density dependence, cultural needs of tribes,

fishing interests and sustainability, and mitigation responsibilities. In order to provide a complete accounting of future needs and desires for Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead, the Task Force also quantified current and anticipated hatchery production consistent with the goals for natural production, and current and potential harvest and fisheries.

The Provisional Quantitative Goals translate into a total increase of naturally produced salmon and steelhead from the current average of 400,000 to as high as 3.6 million adults. This represents an eightfold improvement from current levels, but is considerably less than the number of salmon and steelhead that the Basin produced historically. The goals also reflect available information on habitat production potential. The corresponding average total Columbia River run (natural- plus hatchery-origin fish) would be projected to increase from 2.3 million to approximately 11.4 million fish.

## Continuing the Work of the Task Force

The Task Force recommends these Quantitative Goals as provisional, meaning members agree to them in principle and support further exploration in the next phase of this effort. These recommendations provide critical direction to help guide the Task Force's future discussions. For instance, additional work will be required to strategically align harvest and fishing aspirations and hatchery production with the natural production goals.

The work of the Task Force represents an opportunity to define a clear measure of success and a shared future for Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead. Achieving healthy and harvestable levels of salmon and steelhead will take all regional interests working together in an integrated and efficient manner. The Task Force's long-term goals will help to align the efforts of federal, state, and tribal managers and other stakeholders on a common path to recovering salmon and steelhead in the Columbia Basin.

In June 2018, the MAFAC approved continuation of this effort, providing the Task Force with the opportunity to further test and refine the Provisional Quantitative Goals. The Task Force anticipates that the next phase of work will address many of the questions around how the goals might be achieved. The common foundation developed through this initial phase provides Task Force members with the tools, respect, and inspiration to move forward.