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Snake River Basin Steelhead Receive Protection in Idaho Fisheries for 2018 - 2019

Five conservation organizations have reached an agreement with anglers, guides, community groups, and the State of Idaho to adopt specific conservation measures for Idaho's 2018-2019 steelhead fishery while allowing most fishing to reopen.

The Conservation Angler, Friends of the Clearwater, Snake River Waterkeeper, Wild Fish Conservancy, and Wild Salmon Rivers worked with the Idaho River Community Alliance in agreeing to a suite of voluntary conservation measures to adjust existing steelhead fishing practices in response to the third consecutive year of very low wild Snake River Basin steelhead returns over Lower Granite Dam and into Idaho rivers.

After the conservation organizations sent Idaho a notice in October that its steelhead fishery was in violation of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA), and the Idaho Fish and Game Commission announced in November that it would close the steelhead season on December 7th, the Idaho River Community Alliance approached the conservation groups about a resolution to reopen the season with certain voluntary measures and closures of portions of the Salmon River and South Fork Clearwater River to protect wild fish winter sheltering areas.

With the Idaho Fish and Game Commission's specific river closures and the Idaho River Community Alliance's commitment to voluntarily undertake various fishing practices—keeping wild (intact adipose fin) steelhead in the water while they are being released, use of single barbless hooks, and the mandatory retention of adipose-fin-clipped hatchery steelhead—that reduce the effects on wild steelhead, the conservation groups agreed to forgo litigation while the National Marine Fisheries Service processes Idaho's application for the necessary permit. These are valuable interim measures that will protect wild fish as this season reopens, while allowing focus on long-term protections or strategies that will save steelhead, such as states' fisheries management and evaluation plans or breaching the lower four Snake River dams.

The group of conservation and wild fish advocacy groups agreed not to pursue litigation against Idaho for violating the ESA. Snake River Basin wild steelhead have been listed as a threatened species since 1997. In order to authorize fisheries, states must apply for permits that allow for a certain level "take" (broadly defined by the ESA as any sort of killing, capturing, harm, or harassment) that is incidental to the primary activity (fishing for and retaining hatchery steelhead). Idaho's ESA permit lapsed in 2010, although sport fishing was allowed to continue. The five organizations sent a letter to Idaho of their intent to file suit pursuant to the ESA's citizen suit provisions in mid-October.

"Snake River wild steelhead have been in a steep decline since 2014, and this year's return is likely to be the lowest since 1994. When we learned that Idaho had been conducting steelhead sportfishing without ESA authorization, we decided that wild steelhead deserved more protection than Idaho was providing," said David Moskowitz from The Conservation Angler.

"The Clearwater River's fabled wild B-run steelhead are in serious trouble. While more work will need to be done on behalf of steelhead, the deep concern from many perspectives for this amazing fish is heartening," said Gary Macfarlane from Friends of the Clearwater.

"With historic-low returns and a bleak multi-year forecast, Idaho's steelhead are verging on final collapse. Where laws designed to protect such a fishery are clearly being violated, groups that prioritize species protection over popular interest are duty-bound to enforce those laws for the greatest benefit to the fish," said Buck Ryan from Snake River Waterkeeper. "In this instance, we were able to reach a compromise that maximizes aid to steelhead while easing the financial burden on outfitters and recreationists. If changes in management regimes and better returns are not realized, however, the reality of saving this fishery may dictate harsher outcomes in future years." Ryan added.

"Some of the very best scientific research about steelhead originates in Idaho, and we relied on this work to make the case that there is indeed a true conservation emergency for wild Snake River Basin steelhead. We are pleased that so many others share our concern," said Dr. Nick Gayeski from Wild Fish Conservancy.

"The status quo is obviously not working for Snake River Basin wild steelhead" said Pete Soverel from Wild Salmon Rivers. "Given the conversations over the past few weeks and the agreement that we now have with fellow anglers, I would say that the status quo is no longer."

"In this instance, the ESA's 60-day notice provision achieved its purpose – the parties ultimately were able to agree on measures that significantly reduce the effects of the unpermitted take of wild fish and avoid litigation – while creating an opening for all parties to begin an important and enduring conversation about wild fish and rivers," said Dave Becker, an attorney representing the conservation organizations. "Idaho River Community Alliance has committed to meaningful voluntary actions that are consistent with measures the conservation organizations proposed to the Idaho Fish and Game Commission in October to limit effects on wild fish, and my clients look forward to dialogue with Idaho River Community Alliance and the State of Idaho with the joint goal of ensuring the survival and recovery of wild Snake River Basin steelhead."

"Undeniably, Idaho has historically been a strong steward of its natural resources and at the forefront of wild fish and wild river conservation. Idaho has the wildest places, the wildest rivers and the wildest fish for people everywhere to experience. We believe that this crisis has awoken the Idaho spirit and we hope our shared concern for the future will preserve the essential wildness of Idaho," said Moskowitz from The Conservation Angler. "We have heard this again and again the past few weeks from a wide range of people who care deeply about the Snake River's wild steelhead. We hope that this shared concern can motivate others whose practices adversely affect these wild fish—such as dam operators and government officials throughout Idaho, Oregon, Washington, including the suite of federal agencies—to also confront the urgent need to support the recovery of wild Snake River Basin steelhead."

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