



On the Backs of Salmon



New Threats to Salmon and Clean Water in the Pacific Northwest

December 2003

The Pacific Northwest prides itself on its quality of life, and that includes our salmon runs, giant trees, and clean water.

The Bush administration is in the process of weakening rules under the Northwest Forest Plan that help protect these important Northwest icons.

The following pages offer the reader a look at some of the watersheds that have been protected and restored under current rules and warns of the disastrous consequences for salmon and water quality if these rules are weakened as proposed by the current administration.



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summary

The Pacific Northwest prides itself on its quality of life, and that includes our salmon runs, giant trees, and clean water. Early inhabitants of the region told stories of salmon so plentiful that one could cross rivers “on the backs of salmon.” Over the last century, bad logging practices have choked salmon streams with sediment, caused landslides that dump mud and debris on salmon spawning beds, raised stream temperatures, and precipitated a decline in salmon populations. In 1993, over 100 of the region's fish stocks had already become extinct, and more than 300 stocks faced a moderate to high risk of extinction because of low or declining numbers.

In 1994, the Northwest Forest Plan responded to the decline of Pacific salmon. It was the first federal land management plan in the nation to integrate ecosystem-based strategies to protect salmon, drinking water, old-growth forests, and other important natural resources.

A key part of the Plan has been the Aquatic Conservation Strategy—a scientifically based framework for ensuring that logging and associated road-building will not damage salmon watersheds. The Aquatic Conservation Strategy recognized the destructive impacts of bad logging practices—particularly clearcutting on steep slopes, fragile soils, and in streamside corridors. It is designed to maintain and restore functional habitat for salmon and other aquatic species. It does this by managing public forests on a watershed-wide basis, and prohibiting timber sales and other projects that do not maintain existing conditions or lead to improved watershed conditions. The courts have upheld the strategy but have cautioned that it must be faithfully applied to remain legal.

Since the Northwest Forest Plan was first implemented, there has been a societal and economic shift away from harmful old-growth logging and towards forest restoration work—including thinning and road decommissioning.

Flying in the face of the courts, public opinion, and science, the Bush administration has proposed to send us back in time to the days of rampant and destructive logging practices by weakening the Plan including the rules that protect salmon and clean water. The Bush administration characterizes its changes to the Aquatic Conservation Strategy as “minor tweaks” when in reality the amendments severely weaken the rules and make watershed-wide protection optional.

What follows is an anthology of the real places where the Aquatic Conservation Strategy appropriately protected streams and watersheds, old-growth forests, and where restoration projects are underway or completed. Under Bush’s new rules, it is very likely that these places would not have been protected or restored. Contrary to the assertions of the Bush administration and the timber industry, the Aquatic Conservation Strategy is working as intended to protect special values, like habitat for salmon, and to begin the long-term restoration that is so sorely needed across the Northwest’s scarred and cut-over forested landscape.

Wind River

Gifford Pinchot National Forest, Washington



David Wertz

The Wind River is the last major free-flowing Cascade Mountain river system in southern Washington. Four massive roadless areas, including Indian Heaven and Trapper Creek Wilderness, feed its headwaters, and it is home to gray wolves, goshawks, northern spotted owls, and other wildlife. With excellent spawning and rearing habitat, the Wind River is a stronghold for threatened steelhead trout and chinook salmon.

In 1998, the Forest Service approved the Limbo timber sale to cut 13 million board feet from over 400 acres of mature and old-growth forest in the Wind River basin. In addition to harming several spotted owl sites, the roadless area logging in the Limbo Timber Sale was expected to inflict considerable harm on steelhead trout by increasing sediment and instream flows to harmful levels. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife considers the Wind River steelhead to be the most imperiled run in the lower Columbia River. The sale was blocked by a federal judge because the sale did not conform to the Aquatic Conservation Strategy.

Simpson Creek
Willamette National Forest, Oregon



Oregon Natural Resources Council

Simpson Creek is a tributary of the Middle Fork of the Willamette River in the Cascade Mountains southeast of Eugene, Oregon. This area has been subject to extensive clearcutting and road building in years past, but under the Northwest Forest Plan the healing has begun. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife has reintroduced threatened bull trout to this recovering watershed.

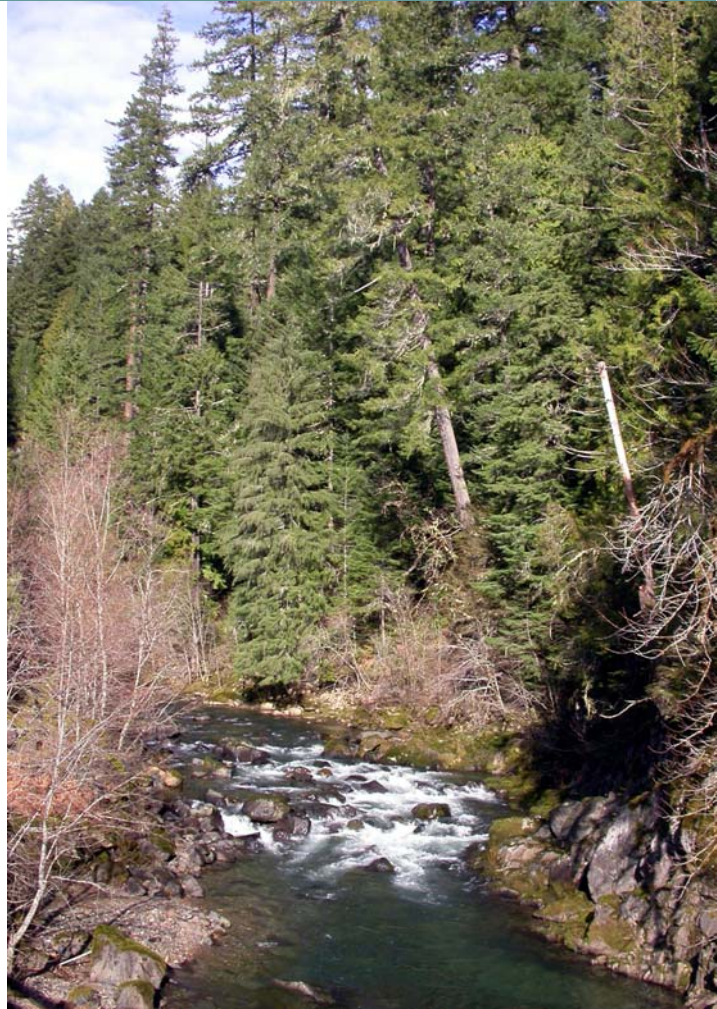
In 1998, the Willamette National Forest proposed the SIMCO timber sale that involved clearcutting almost 500 acres of the remaining mature and old growth forest in steep landslide-prone watersheds. These ancient forests help maintain slope stability and are the building blocks for future recovery of the watershed. The Forest Service withdrew this sale after conservation groups challenged it on the grounds that Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives were not being met.

protect

Canton Creek Roseburg BLM District, Oregon

Canton Creek is a tributary to the North Umpqua River in the Cascade Mountains east of Roseburg, Oregon. According to the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) watershed analysis, in only 40 years more than half of the 40,600 acre watershed was clearcut. The private industrial owners clearcut all of their 10,000 acres between 1960 and 1995, and the federal government (Forest Service and BLM) clearcut 40% of the public forests.

In 1995, the forests of Canton Creek were designated a Tier 1 Key Watershed under the Northwest Forest Plan. Currently, the Plan requires that Key Watersheds be given the "highest priority for watershed restoration." Canton Creek's status as a Key Watershed is because, in spite of the degradation caused by past clearcutting, it still serves as an important spawning and rearing habitat for Umpqua cutthroat trout, coastal coho salmon, and steelhead.



Francis Eatherington

Despite the need for strong protections for Canton Creek, the Roseburg BLM decided to clearcut 215 acres of mature and old-growth forests.

Their reasoning: degradation caused by the large openings in the forest canopy would be less than the degradation caused by logging roads falling into streams. When a federal court reviewed the sale, it found it did not comply with the Aquatic Conservation Strategy.

Cow Creek
Medford BLM District, Oregon



Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center

Cow Creek, in the Coastal Siskiyou Mountains, flows into the Umpqua River and provides habitat for chinook salmon and cutthroat and steelhead trout. Umpqua coho salmon, federally listed as threatened, also spawn in the waters of Cow Creek. The West Fork Cow Creek has been heavily impacted by logging; over half of the watershed has been clearcut. The Northwest Forest Plan designated the West Fork Cow Creek a Tier 1 Key Watershed, meaning it is critical for salmon recovery.

In 1997, the Medford BLM proposed the Key Elk Timber Sale that involved clearcutting 290 acres of mature and old-growth forests in the West Fork Cow Creek. This sale was halted on the grounds that the BLM misrepresented the impacts of the old-growth logging on fish habitat. The BLM claimed that fixing roads would offset the impacts of the timber sale.

The logging was halted by the courts because of the impacts on the endangered coho salmon.

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Deer Creek Medford BLM District, Oregon



Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center

Deer Creek flows into the Illinois River which meets the mighty Rogue River on its way to the Pacific Ocean. Deer Creek is home to a variety of fish, but 90% of the coho populations have decreased since 1970 due to water diversions, logging, and road construction.

The Deer Creek Watershed Analysis best describes the history of the area: "Prior to the settlement of the valley, pristine streams flowed from their source to Deer Creek. Water quality was extremely high. Seeps, springs, and snow all contributed to keeping the water cool. Due to the mature nature of the majority of the forest in the higher elevations of the watershed, winter snowpack would remain for longer periods of time than it currently does."

The Deer Mom Timber Sale was offered in the fall of 1998. It called for 855 acres to be logged through group selection and commercial thinning in the Deer Creek Watershed. Some of the logging was immediately adjacent to creeks, although these areas were to serve as "riparian reserves." The sale was stopped on the grounds that Aquatic Conservation Strategy objectives were not being met.



Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center

Lower Hayfork Creek

Shasta-Trinity National Forest, California



Environmental Protection Information Center

Environmental Protection Information Center

Lower Hayfork Creek is a tributary to the Wild and Scenic South Fork Trinity River in the Klamath-Trinity River basin and provides habitat for coho salmon, spring-run chinook salmon, and Klamath Mountain Province steelhead. The Lower Hayfork Creek Timber Sale was proposed by the Shasta-Trinity National Forest in 1998. This sale proposed logging 1,417 acres in the Lower Hayfork Creek watershed in areas with highly unstable soils and within riparian reserves. Approximately 7.5 miles of road reconstruction and associated impacts would also take place.

Citizens For Better Forestry, Forest Service Employees For Environmental Ethics, and Kenneth Lanspa (a Forest Service soils scientist) commented on and appealed the sale. Eventually, the Lower Hayfork Creek timber sale was stopped by the courts because it did not meet the objectives of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy.

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Steinacher Creek Klamath National Forest, California



Karuk Tribe



Karuk Tribe

Steinacher Creek is adjacent to the Marble Mountain Wilderness, within Siskiyou County, in northern California. Steinacher Creek is also a tributary to the Wild and Scenic Wooley Creek within the Wild and Scenic Salmon River drainage, which is a critical source of high quality cold water within the Klamath River Basin, Tier 1, Key Watershed. The area serves as critical habitat for both aquatic and terrestrial species, including coho salmon, chinook salmon, steelhead, spotted owl, Pacific fisher, and many other important old-growth associated species.

The Steinacher Road decommissioning project took place as a Memorandum Of Understanding (cost-share agreement) between the Karuk Tribe and the Klamath National Forest from 1999 to 2002. Decommissioning removed 7.2 miles of road and approximately 187,000 cubic yards of sediment, securing critically important salmon habitat.

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East Fork Lewis River

Gifford Pinchot National Forest, Washington



Friends of the East Fork Lewis

The East Fork Lewis River pours out of the rugged terrain south of Mt. St. Helens in southern Washington. Its pure waters originate in five large roadless areas—the immense Silver Star and the East Fork roadless areas feed the headwaters—and flow freely without obstruction to the Lewis River just before joining the Columbia River. Big fires early in the last century, followed by aggressive management that pulled logs from streams, have caused a steep decline in spawning and rearing habitat for threatened steelhead trout. Steelhead populations have plummeted to dangerously low levels since 1986.

In 1999, the Forest Service approved the Fish Habitat Rehabilitation Project to improve fish habitat on federal lands in the East Fork of the Lewis River. In addition to planting trees and carefully thinning in dense young riparian forests, the Forest Service placed nearly four dozen log jams, cribs, and boulders into the East Fork, removed 1.5 miles of road, and converted nearly a mile of road into a trail. By providing cover, trapping, and holding spawning gravels, and directing stream flow into side channels, the complexity and diversity of fish habitat in the East Fork has improved significantly and the goals of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy are being

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Five Rivers Watershed

Siuslaw National Forest, Oregon



Oregon Natural Resources Council



Oregon Natural Resources Council

The Five Rivers Watershed is located in the Oregon Coast Range southwest of Corvallis, Oregon. This area of highly productive, low-elevation forests was once the epicenter of the Siuslaw National Forest's old-growth liquidation efforts. After the Northwest Forest Plan was implemented, watershed restoration became the primary objective in this watershed. Pacific salmon still return to this area and restoration is needed to ensure that they persist and recover.

The Five Rivers Project restoration experiment was conceived by the Forest Service and Oregon State University scientists to test alternative ways of restoring watersheds in Oregon's Coast Range. The Five Rivers Project was approved in two parts. The April 2002 Record of Decision involved closing 76 miles of roads, decommissioning almost 20 miles of roads, placing large wood in 23 miles of streams, 200 acres of riparian planting, and non-commercial thinning of 519 acres. The May 2003 Record of Decision involves thinning thousands of acres of dense monoculture plantations that resulted from clearcutting. Thinning these stands will enhance forest diversity and accelerate the growth of large trees that will someday provide valuable structure to salmon streams. Although the Five Rivers Environmental Impact Statement identified some short-term aquatic impacts from road decommissioning and other restoration activities, these effects were determined to be short-term and outweighed by long-term benefits of the restoration activities.

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Coquille River Siskiyou National Forest, Oregon



Francis Eatherington

Francis Eatherington

The Coquille River, a coastal river in the southern Oregon Coastal Mountains, has been heavily impacted by industrial logging activities. Much of the Coquille River Watershed is owned by private timber companies and managed on short rotations for fiber production.

The Skinny Doe Timber Sale is a thinning project on 428 acres of thick tree farms that will produce 4.61 million board feet of timber in the South Fork Coquille River. The stands that are to be thinned were clearcut in the 1930's and 1940's with steam donkeys on railroads.

The sale was stopped by litigation because of the impact to fish species, largely due to the fact that over 5.4 miles of road construction and reconstruction would take place. The sale was enjoined by the courts on the grounds that the sedimentation created by the road construction would harm salmon in the Coquille River.

The Forest Service agreed not to build any new roads and instead use only existing railroad beds and jeep roads. The sale was released from injunction and is to be auctioned in the fall of 2003.

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Rock Creek Roseburg BLM District, Oregon



Francis Eatherington

The Rock Creek watershed contains about 62,500 acres. Within just 50 years, 75% of this area was clearcut. About half of the watershed is publicly owned, managed by Roseburg BLM. In just 20 years, Roseburg BLM sold almost 6,000 acres of old-growth and mature forests for clearcutting.

The Northwest Forest Plan designated about half of the public lands to be set aside to protect and restore old-growth forests in Late Successional Reserves (LSR). But just the next year the U.S. Congress appeased the timber industry and passed a "salvage-rider" bill that suspended environmental laws and allowed 252 acres of the LSRs in Rock Creek to be clearcut.

After all the clearcutting, Rock Creek still struggles to support depressed numbers of summer and winter steelhead, spring chinook salmon, coho salmon, Umpqua cutthroat trout, and Pacific lamprey.

In March of 2003, the Roseburg BLM decided to implement their first forest restoration project in Rock Creek, the Relativity Timber Sale, that includes 115 acres of managed plantations. These acres are to be thinned so that the remaining trees will be able to grow larger, faster. This includes 45 acres of restoration thinning in Riparian Reserves. No yarding will take place closer than 100 feet to Rock Creek. In this area, 12 trees per acre will be killed to create dead wood for wildlife habitat, instead of being sold. Elsewhere, the thinning will benefit local mills that have been modified to accommodate small diameter trees.

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