Jack Venrick

From: "Jack Venrick" <jacksranch@qwest.net>
Sent: Thursday, February 16, 2006 12:03 AM
Subject: Nature, Not Man is Responsible for West Coast Salmon Decline

This is too good for words. Old news but good news. If you don't have time to read it, print it out and read later. Or just read the title. Mean while back in the dark ages, Washington DOE is counting fish and metering water on the Olympic Peninsula. Mark this site as a favorite and get smart on fish. It seems the fish are better at surving than the property owners in Washington state.

Jack Venrick
Enumclaw, WA

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Nature-Not Man, is Responsible for West Coast Salmon Decline

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Author	Message
Ken Shock	Posted: Fri Feb 03, 2006 11:26 pm Post subject: Nature-Not Man, is Responsible for West Coast Salmon Decline quote
Joined: 03 Jan 2004 Posts: 95 Location: Brinnon, Kona	**Nature, Not Man, is Responsible for West Coast Salmon Decline** by John Carlisle On March 16 1999, the U.S. Commerce Department's National Marine and Fisheries Service (NMFS) added nine populations of West Coast salmon to the endangered species list, bringing the total number of federally-protected salmon subspecies to 24. The recent designations are especially significant because for the first time federal protection has been extended to salmon inhabiting streams located in a heavily-populated area of the Pacific Northwest, namely Seattle. Seattle now has the dubious

distinction of being the first large city to come under the strict regulatory scrutiny of the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Listing these salmon as endangered is certain to inflict significant harm on the region's economy, causing billions of dollars in losses for a broad range of industries including those involved with timber, housing, recreation and agriculture, among others. Additionally, the listings will force federal, state and local governments to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a multitude of salmon-restoration programs that will require increases in taxes for such basic services as water and sewer. Individuals will also feel the pinch in the form of intrusive regulations governing routine water use, lawn care, car washing and any other activity that can conceivably create water runoff problems for fish.

The NMFS insists that these huge regulatory burdens are necessary. Federal officials and environmentalists claim that a precipitous decline in the population of West Coast salmon that has been occurring since the mid-1970s is attributable to human activities such as over-harvesting, habitat destruction for development projects, hatchery and dam operations, and land-use and water project development that degrade stream conditions vital to salmon survival.

But the premise that human actions are responsible for the decline of salmon, thus justifying sweeping regulations against development, is erroneous. The NMFS's ESA listing ignores a rapidly accumulating body of scientific evidence showing that changes in the natural climatic conditions of the Pacific Northwest are largely responsible for the low numbers of salmon. Specifically, a naturally-occurring increase in the temperature of the Pacific Ocean off the coast has caused a sharp decline in salmon by destroying most of the salmon's food supply and increasing the number of fish that prey on salmon.

It is these ocean conditions, not man, that play the preeminent role in causing fluctuations in salmon population levels. The federal response of placing more salmon under ESA protection and imposing additional regulatory burdens on businesses and property owners in the region will do nothing to counter the adverse natural forces that harm salmon but will needlessly hurt the economy. Most importantly, the oceanic phenomenon that has been so detrimental to salmon survival operates on a 20-to-30 year cycle, and there is evidence that the ocean cycle is entering a phase that will stimulate a major rebound in the salmon population, making cumbersome government mandates unnecessary.

Salmon Have Declined Despite Conservation Efforts and a Better Environment

The number of salmon entering the Columbia River has fallen dramatically from a high of 2.03 million in 1970 to a low of 673,000 in 1995.1 By the mid-1990s, the salmon population had dropped by at least 70%. Naturally, this decline is an issue of grave concern to fishermen and government leaders given the great importance of salmon to the Pacific Northwest economy. Because the salmon catch had been at record high levels prior to the sudden decline, it was assumed that the only explanation for this sudden precipitous decline in the salmon population had to be due to human activities. Fish biologists and environmental activists argued that a combination of overfishing, land development near streams and rivers, dam operations and other human factors combined to deprive salmon of the natural habitat necessary for them to swim and procreate without hindrance.

The Pacific Northwest's rivers and streams are important to the ecological cycle of the salmon because it is where adult salmon migrate to lay their eggs. After hatching, the young salmon make their way to the ocean where they spend one to three years before returning to the rivers to procreate, or spawn,

thus beginning the cycle again.

Since 1978, at least $3 billion has been spent to increase, or at least maintain, the West Coast salmon population.2 Fishery managers have mainly used this money to operate hatcheries that breed salmon, monitor harvest levels and restore salmon habitat. A broad range of other policies has been implemented to enhance salmon survivability rates.

Because salmon lay their eggs in shallow, cool pools that are often found along the banks of streams, forestry practices have changed in recent years to protect salmon from harm. For example, buffer zones - areas directly adjacent to stream banks where activities that might disturb breeding pools or other vital habitat are prohibited - are now required. Buffers mandate that no construction or other development take place within a specified distance from a stream bank to prevent harm to breeding pools or other vital habitat.

Other land-use laws have also been implemented to severely restrict development near rivers and wetlands. This is the reason why there have been no new dams built in Washington in the past 35 years. Dams can block the migration routes of salmon and dam turbines can pose serious hazards to salmon survivability. As a result, existing dams now have fish ladders that allow salmon to swim past the dam as well as fish-friendly turbines that prevent salmon from being harmed.

Citizen groups have also organized to clean many streams while agricultural land-use practices and wastewater treatment have steadily improved over the last 25 years.3 Together these efforts have helped Pacific Northwest streams become significantly cleaner than they were in the 1970s and thus more ecologically amenable to salmon. A federally-funded 1991 study by the Battelle Marine Science's Laboratory, for example, concluded that Puget Sound - home of the Puget Sound chinook salmon that was recently listed by the NMFS - is the cleanest it has been since before World War II.4 Nevertheless, the salmon has not rebounded.

Despite billions of dollars in expenditures, widespread implementation of policies to aid the salmon and a cleaner environment, the salmon population continues to decline. The NMFS and environmental activists insist that more stringent regulation, more restrictions on development and additional spending is needed. But if the previous efforts could not halt the salmon decline, it is doubtful that doing more of the same will yield better results.

Warmer Ocean Temperatures Have Been Killing the Salmon

Until recently, fish biologists assumed that only changes in the freshwater habitat of salmon could explain the variability in the salmon population. Scientists were thus quick to conclude that human modification of this habitat was the reason for the salmon population decline. Implicit in this assumption was the rejection of the possibility that other factors - such as natural oceanic cycles - played a significant role in salmon survivability. It was assumed that the ocean was simply a stable, benign force that could be discounted in assessing the fortunes of salmon populations.

This turned out to be incorrect.

The marked decline in the salmon catch beginning in the mid-1970s corresponded to an increase in the temperature of the Pacific Ocean off the coasts of Washington, Oregon and California. This warming has

had a most detrimental impact on salmon survival rates.

When the water warms, nutrients needed for the production of phytoplankton (algae) - including phosphorous, nitrogen and silicon - drop. When phytoplankton production decreases, tiny invertebrate organisms called zooplankton which feed on the phytoplankton also decreases. Since 1976, zooplankton levels have declined by an estimated 70% due to ocean warming. Because salmon feed on zooplankton, they have suffered accordingly.5

Dr. Victor Kaczynski, a fish biologist and consultant on fishing issues in the Pacific Northwest, says that "per classical ecological theory, a 70% decline in zooplankton biomass results in a 70% reduction in predators dependent on zooplankton directly and in their food chain (such as coho salmon) while an 80% reduction would result in a food supply that could only support 20% of the prior predator biomass (such as coho salmon)." With a reduction in zooplankton levels by more than 70% in the past two decades, West Coast salmon have declined by at least 70% as well.6

In addition, the salmon numbers are further reduced because the warmer water attracts predators such as mackerel and Pacific hake. These fish doubly threaten the salmon by consuming the reduced zooplankton food supply and by eating the salmon themselves.

Salmon are not the only marine animals affected by warm water conditions, however. The populations of the California Murre seabird and the Washington Murre have fallen by 50% and 80%, respectively, since the 1970s. Oysters, Oregon pink shrimp, sole and other fish have experienced dramatic declines similar to the salmon.7

An examination of the survival rates of young salmon, or smolts, further illustrates how the unfavorable ocean conditions can have a negative effect on salmon. For the coho salmon population (a federally-protected salmon group) to remain stable, the minimum marine survival rate required is an estimated 2.7%. The survival rate is the percentage of salmon that make it to adulthood.

Dr. Kaczynski notes that this ocean survival rate directly corresponds with the salmon population levels. For example, between 1965 and 1975, the coho salmon survival rate was 6.7%. This was significantly above the minimum 2.7%, which explains why the salmon catch reached record levels in that period. After 1975, the coho salmon survival rate started falling. Between 1991 and 1997, the coho's survival rate was a mere 1.2%, nowhere near the level to maintain a stable population. Dr. Kaczynski concludes that "coho marine survival was so poor in 1976, 1983-84, 1986, 1989, 1991-1997 that coastal coho salmon populations would have declined naturally even if there were no salmon fishing seasons."8

In another indication of the negative impact of the warmer ocean conditions, body sizes of surviving salmon have fallen from an average of 8.2 pounds recorded between 1970 and 1975, to only 6.2 pounds today. The reduction in body size means that females lay fewer eggs in the freshwater spawning areas, further reducing the population.

Another climatic event that affected the salmon population was the West Coast drought extending from the mid-1970s to 1993. The years 1987 to 1992 were the second driest in recorded California history. This is significant because when stream levels are lower, salmon survivability is reduced.

Rapid growth of the salmon population following the drought offers evidence of the drought's adverse effects. Two years after the drought ended in California in 1993, chinook salmon returned in

remarkable numbers in several of the state's rivers. For example, the natural salmon population in the Klamath River is 97,000 adults. But by 1995, the population had soared to 200,000 - levels not seen since the 1960s.

Dr. Kaczynski concludes that the, "triple negative" of "adverse inland freshwater survival, estuary survival, and ocean survival... since 1976" explain the dramatic decline in the salmon population and man's unsuccessful efforts to reverse the trend 9

20-to-30-Year Cycle Controls Ocean Temperatures and Salmon Populations

Historical records provide powerful evidence that the 23-year decline in salmon is natural and not the result of human activity. Salmon populations oscillate every 20-30 years and correlate precisely with rises and drops in ocean temperatures. Furthermore, the same cyclical changes in the ocean's temperature that reduce West Coast salmon populations significantly increase the population of Alaskan salmon. In fact, the Alaskan salmon catch has been at record levels since about 1976.10

This inverse correlation between West Coast salmon and Alaskan salmon is hardly new. It has existed for at least as long as fishing records have been kept. For example, in 1915, the Pacific Fisherman magazine reported that the Alaskan salmon catch was so low that "salmon packers returned to port" early. Yet, the publication also recorded that "The spring (chinook salmon) fishing season on the Columbia River (Washington and Oregon)... proved to be one of the best for some years." Twenty-four years later, however, the situation was reversed. The 1939 Alaskan salmon catch "was regarded as the greatest in history" while the Pacific Northwest salmon catch was "one of the lowest in the history of the Columbia." Then, just as dramatically, the situation again reversed. National Fisherman magazine reported that the 1972 Alaskan salmon catch was a "disaster" while the Columbia River salmon catch was the largest "since counting began in 1938."11

The current cycle benefits Alaska. While Alaska was experiencing its biggest salmon catch ever in 1994, the salmon numbers in the Pacific Northwest were so low that the Columbia spring chinook fishery had to be shut down and west coast troll fishing banned. So productive has the Alaskan salmon fishery been in recent years that during some years, millions of salmon were not even harvested because there was no market for the fish.12

Not surprisingly, politicians have been debating the periodic plight of Pacific Northwest salmon for at least 100 years. In his 1899 State of the State speech, Washington Governor John Rogers said, "The salmon fisheries of the state have, in the past, been wonderfully productive. Of late, however, evidence of a decrease in the run is apparent, and all are agreed that something ought to be done to prevent the final extinction of a great industry."13

The cyclical warming and cooling of the Northeast Pacific Ocean that governs salmon levels is the result of a phenomenon known as the Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO). The PDO is an atmospheric event that occurs every 20 to 30 years in which the wind circulation patterns in the Northeast Pacific Ocean shift, thereby changing ocean temperatures and the climate in Northwest North America. The oscillations are precipitated by the Aleutian Low, a quasi-permanent atmospheric pressure cell that covers much of the North Pacific from late fall to spring. The size and intensity of the Aleutian Low varies and it is this variance which causes the 20 to 30 year cycles that profoundly affect ocean conditions and salmon productivity.14

During the cool phase of the PDO, the period that is beneficial to West Coast salmon, the Aleutian Low weakens. The winds change in a westerly direction, which shifts a body of cool water to the Pacific Northwest Coast and causes the winters to become cooler and wetter throughout the region. In addition, the wind patterns bring colder, nutrient-bearing water to the surface - a phenomenon known as upwelling - which increases the food supply for phytoplankton and zooplankton. As a result, the phytoplankton and zooplankton populations increase - which means more food for salmon. Conversely, there is less rainfall in Alaska and a sharp decrease in the phytoplankton and zooplankton food supply due to a decrease in the upwelling of nutrient-bearing waters.15

During the PDO's warm phase that is so detrimental to salmon production in the Pacific Northwest, the Aleutian Low strengthens and moves eastward. The wind patterns change from a westerly to a southwesterly direction, the cool ocean water moves away from the North American coast to the central North Pacific, and the winters on the West Coast become warmer and drier. Alaska's weather, on the other hand, becomes wetter. The upwelling of nutrient-bearing cold water decreases off the West Coast, thereby lowering the phytoplankton and zooplankton food supply - and thus decreasing the amount of food available for salmon. Off of Alaska, upwelling of nutrient-rich waters increases, thereby increasing the phytoplankton and zooplankton food supply.16

There have been four periods in the 20th century when the PDO reversed itself: 1900-1924, a cool period good for Pacific Northwest salmon but bad for Alaskan salmon; 1925-1946, a warm period; 1947-1976, a cool period in which Pacific Salmon catches reached record highs; and the current warm period that began in 1977.17

Changes in winter precipitation have also had a significant impact on salmon. The infusion of warm air during the PDO's warm phase has opposite effects on winters in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest. In Alaska, the warm, moist air increases the level of precipitation while in the Pacific Northwest the warm, humid air causes lower-than-average precipitation.18

The level of precipitation is vital for salmon because the more rain and snowfall, the higher the levels of freshwater streams that salmon need to spawn. Since the mid-1970s, higher precipitation resulting from the PDO's warm phase has significantly increased the water levels in Alaska's major salmon-bearing rivers. The discharge from Alaska's Kenai River, for example, is about 18% higher than during the cool period. By contrast, the water discharge on British Columbia's Skeena and Frasier Rivers and the Columbia River are 8%, 8% and 14% lower, respectively, than during the cool phase.19

Freshwater Management Programs Cannot Compensate for Adverse Ocean Conditions

The immense influence of the oceanic cycle on salmon should give politicians and bureaucrats considerable pause before implementing costly policies that penalize people. Even if this natural cycle was not the culprit, the failure of past attempts to maintain or increase salmon populations suggest that a regulatory approach is not advisable.

After 1920, the Pacific Northwest salmon catch began to decline, consistent with the oceanic warming cycle that started about that time. Yet, that was when the first-ever harvest restrictions were put in place to protect the salmon from overfishing. Harvesting limits represented the first management strategy for reversing salmon decline.20

The Pacific Northwest's experience with hydroelectric power provides further evidence that man's influence on the salmon population is limited. Between 1932 and 1975, 19 major dams were constructed on the Columbia and Snake Rivers while numerous other dams were built on the tributaries. Dams are believed to be detrimental to salmon because they destroy salmon spawning habitat and impede their ability to migrate on the rivers. But the salmon population jumped to record levels during the period between 1947 and 1976 - the salmon-friendly cool phase of the oceanic cycle. If human destruction of the salmon's freshwater habitat was as crucial as some people have contended, then the salmon population should not have dramatically increased during the period. Dam construction started when the salmon population was falling dramatically. Not only did the salmon population stabilize, but it rebounded to reach record levels by the early 1970s.

The years 1947 to 1976 were also a period of great economic growth in the region and development was infringing on the salmon habitat. The salmon's impressive population growth during this period strongly suggests that the oceanic cycle compensated for the adverse impact of hydrosystem development as well as other development that occurred during that time.21

The second management strategy adopted to reverse the salmon decline called for the installation of fish ladders and other additions to dams to ease salmon passage on the rivers. In addition, hatcheries were constructed to breed and then release salmon into the wild salmon population. By 1975, the five million pounds of hatchery smolts released into the Columbia River Basin equaled the adult catch.22

With the failure of hatcheries and fish ladders to reverse the salmon decline after 1975, a third management strategy was introduced that emphasized additional efforts to increase salmon migration. Money was spent on bypass facilities at dams to divert salmon from dangerous turbines, programs to transport Snake River salmon to below the Columbia River's Bonneville Dam and on other programs to speed salmon migration. To prevent any gains made through these efforts from being negated by fishing, harvest limits were established.23

At the very least, the salmon population should have stabilized at its mid-1970s level given the general improvement in hatchery practices, better agricultural conservation, continuous improvements in state and federal forest management practices and advances in wastewater treatment, according to University of Washington fish biologist James J. Anderson.24 Anderson points to studies showing transported salmon survival rates at more than 80%, an impressive figure. Other studies, Anderson notes, "show improving smolt passage survival since the early 1970s." Had the freshwater conditions of the salmon been as pivotal as claimed, there should have been no drop in the salmon population. Anderson concludes that the success of these management programs proves "that climate change negated (freshwater) passage improvements."25

An increasing number of fish biologists are also coming to the same conclusion that ocean survival rates, not the freshwater conditions, are the primary determinant in salmon population numbers. Dr. Ray Hilborn and Dr. Claribel Coronado of the Fisheries Research Institute at the University of Washington observe that it is time to rethink the "traditional explanations" that changes in salmon numbers are largely determined by the "4-Hs: Habitat, Harvest, Hatcheries and Hydropower." They conclude that fluctuations in the salmon population "can be explained by changes in ocean survival."26

W.G. Pearcy of the College of Oceanic and Atmospheric Sciences at Oregon State University believes that 1983 marked a paradigm shift when scientists began to recognize that "ocean factors were

important to salmon survival." Pearcy believes that the migration of predatory fishes such as mackerel and Pacific hake into the ocean off the Pacific Northwest during warm water conditions is the "most likely cause" of salmon depletion.27 Dr. Steven Hare of the Pacific Halibut Commission and Drs. Nathan Mantua and Robert Francis of the University of Washington conclude that the variability in ocean conditions is pivotal to salmon abundance and agree that salmon management programs on freshwater streams cannot compensate for the negative influences of the ocean.28 While citing the need for continued improvements in freshwater management programs, these scientists believe that the only way West Coast salmon will rebound is when the PDO reverses itself and the ocean once again cools. Given the fact that the current warm phase began about 23 years ago, these scientists believe that the PDO cycle, which averages 20-to-30 years, will reverse itself within a decade.29

Indeed, the oceanic cycle could very well be changing to a cool period. As noted earlier, the decades-long drought, a consequence of warm ocean conditions, that affected the Pacific Northwest and California has ended. By 1995, the California salmon population was rebounding in great numbers. Dr. Kaczynski believes, "There is some evidence that Southern Oregon and Northern California coho salmon also began to exhibit increased survival relative to Northern Oregon coho salmon. And we appeared to be moving into a cool, wet inland climate cycle beginning in 1995."30

At the very moment then that the federal government is imposing a litany of costly ESA regulations to restore salmon populations, the same oceanic cycle that caused the decline is reversing itself, promising a rebound in the salmon population.

Politics, Not Science, Is Driving Salmon Issue

But as is too often the case with environmental issues, politics instead of science is setting the terms of the debate. Despite the emerging consensus in the scientific community about the preeminent role the ocean plays in salmon survivability and man's limited ability to counteract it, many elected officials and environmental activists continue to blame human activity.

The mayor of Seattle, Paul Schell, says: "The reasons for a declining salmon population can be summed up easily: We humans create too many competing uses for our rivers, streams and oceans. If you're looking for something to blame, it is the growth and development that surrounds us."31 Former Environmental Protection Agency Director Bill Ruckelshaus notes, "Over the last hundred years as people moved out here and developed this part of the country, we've forced the salmon to adjust to us... [The salmon ESA listings] will force us to adjust to the fish."32

Already, the White House and state governments are rushing to spend an additional $300 million dollars on salmon restoration projects - projects that scientists have said will, at best, have a limited impact on salmon population numbers. President Bill Clinton has proposed $100 million in spending for such things as river temperature control projects and dam removal.

Since salmon-friendly dams failed to halt the population decline, federal authorities now seem intent on getting rid of the dams altogether. On April 14, the NMFS proposed that four Snake River dams be destroyed because doing so might help the salmon. Even though federal officials acknowledge that destroying the dams may not make a difference, they are willing to proceed with the project in the face of strong opposition from farmers and barge operators who argue that the dams are critical to their livelihood.33 The state of Washington may even challenge the renewal of federal licenses for dams the

state deems to be salmon-killers. There are 22 dams up for relicensing over the next 11 years.34

Washington Governor Gary Locke has asked the state legislature for $201 million to implement an aggressive salmon recovery plan.35 The governor's plan has yet to be acted on, but since March the state Senate has approved bills authorizing 13 state agencies to spend more than $600 million on a variety of salmon restoration programs.36

This barrage of federal and state funding would go to such salmon-restoration activities as planting trees, buying conservation easements, stabilizing stream banks, rebuilding culverts, mapping watersheds and monitoring restoration activities.37 Whatever other ecological merits these projects may have, one thing they will not achieve is restoring the salmon population while ocean conditions remain unfavorable.

Even more disturbing than the proliferation of wasteful spending, however, is the dire economic consequences that unneeded salmon regulations will have on the region's economy. A "Forest and Fish" agreement negotiated between the timber industry and Washington state and federal officials would place 15% of existing commercial timber permanently out of production, costing the industry up to $2.5 billion in revenue over the next 50 years. The agreement, which is currently being considered by the state legislature, would impose rigorous regulations affecting 60,000 miles of streams on eight million acres of private forest land.38 The industry would be required to expand the no-cut buffer zones near streams to an average of 150 feet, a figure that still doesn't satisfy environmentalists.39

Already, farmers, developers and small property owners are feeling the pinch of ill-conceived salmon-restoration policies.

In Okanogan County, Washington, for example, NMFS officials are refusing to allow water to be released for irrigation because they haven't determined what impact the release would have on salmon. As a result, the county's farmers may lose their crops for the season.

On April 26, the Seattle City Council voted to delay for at least three months a developer's plan to build five homes over the water on Salmon Bay because the council wants to determine if the development would affect salmon. Says City Councilman Richard Conlin, "We want to do everything to protect the salmon." The Seattle Post-Intelligencer editorializes: "That is fair warning to developers that the worm has turned when it comes to new construction."40

The worm has apparently turned for small property owners as well. On April 19, the environmental group Citizens for a Natural Habitat sued to block construction of a 51-house development on an 18-acre parcel in Lynnwood, Washington. They claim that a tiny stream, no more than ankle deep at its peak, is vital for salmon. Although salmon cannot swim in the stream, environmentalists claim that the stream feeds into larger streams inhabited by salmon, and this allegedly makes the tributaries just as vital.

The lawsuit threatens to bankrupt the two elderly women who own the 18-acre parcel. Delila Gribble, 82, who has owned a 10-acre portion of the property in question since the 1940s, says "If this doesn't get settled, I'm going to be in the poorhouse." Although she is prohibited from selling the land while litigation is in progress, she still must pay skyrocketing property taxes on it.

The situation is just as dire for Viola Allen, 72, the owner of the remaining 8-acre portion, whose

property taxes are also rising. Allen, who is in poor health and would like to move from her dilapidated house, can't leave unless she can sell the property.41

On April 28, a coalition of builders, farmers and cattlemen filed the first lawsuit challenging the federal government's decision to list salmon on the endangered species list. They charge that that government failed to take into account other factors, such as natural fluctuations in the salmon population, to explain the present decline.42

But environmentalists are ready to file lawsuits to enforce the salmon listings. "We won't hesitate to sue if salmon aren't protected," says Todd True of the Earthjustice Legal Defense Fund.43

Recreational activities are also being affected. On April 27, officials in the community of Mountlake Terrace, Washington cancelled an annual amateur water-skiing event out of concern the skiing might harm the salmon.44

And suburban residents will be affected too. Governor Locke's salmon-restoration plan includes water-use regulations that would sharply restrict the amount of water residents can use for the most basic activities. These regulations would dictate to homeowners how or if they can wash their cars, water their lawns, use fertilizer, build a tool shed, add a patio or engage in any other activity which can possibly create a runoff problem for salmon.45

The Pacific Northwest is going to pay a stiff price indeed for the government's failure to heed scientific research that concludes that nature, not man, has been hammering the region's salmon for the past two decades.

Unfortunately, environmental activists are also exploiting the salmon issue to advance a major component of their political agenda: stopping urban sprawl. The claim that urban sprawl - or economic development - is consuming much of the nation's farmland and open space is false given that less than 5% of the nation's land is developed and that the federal government has determined that our farm land acreage is sufficient for the foreseeable future.46 But urban sprawl is now a major issue for many Americans, so much so that Vice President Al Gore has made it one of his key issues this year.

Aaron Ostrom, executive director of 1,000 Friends of Washington, an anti-sprawl activist group, says: "The creeping blight of urban sprawl that is unraveling the character of our communities and fueling the traffic jams that make us miserable is also driving wild salmon into extinction... The key to saving salmon is protecting salmon habitat. Unfettered growth is polluting streams and rivers and mauling the land they flow through creating conditions that salmon can not survive."47

Seattle Mayor Paul Schell directly ties salmon protection to his policies to combat alleged sprawl. "We have purposely chosen to accept more density in our downtown area in order to protect open space around outlying streams and wetlands."48

King County Councilman Brian Derdowski, a slow-growth advocate, says, "Traffic congestion, crowded schools, high taxes, salmon, are all part of the same problem." Derdowski asserts, "The salmon will save ourselves from ourselves."49

Conclusion

When will the politicians and other government officials start taking into consideration the scientific evidence that points to ocean conditions as the key factor determining salmon survivability?

They can't claim ignorance as a defense. The NMFS finally acknowledged in 1998 that adverse inland climate and ocean conditions are at least partly responsible for the decline in the salmon population.50 But the NMFS and state bureaucracies are still implementing salmon policy based on the same assumptions of human impact that have been proven to be largely untrue.

No one can deny that reasonable measures should be taken to protect the salmon population, especially when natural conditions sharply lower survival. But there is no justification for mandating costly salmon-restoration policies that are ineffective in countering the effects of adverse ocean conditions.

Furthermore, salmon are not about to become extinct. The bitter irony of the recent ESA listing of West Coast salmon and the plethora of onerous regulations that will ensue is that the same ocean conditions that caused the precipitous decline beginning two decades ago is likely to soon reverse itself, promising a major rebound in the salmon population.

Salmon extinction, it turns out, is just another excuse to increase government control of the economy and constrict individuals' rights.

Footnotes

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