

An underwater photograph showing several salmon and steelhead swimming over a rocky riverbed. The fish are silvery with dark spots and some have pinkish-red markings. The rocks are covered in green moss and algae. The water is clear and blue.

Executive Summary

A VISION for SALMON and STEELHEAD

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

**Phase 2 Report of the
Columbia Basin Partnership Task Force
of the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee**



Steelhead Credit: Rich Gross

Executive Summary

NOAA Fisheries and its Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee (MAFAC) convened the Columbia Basin Partnership Task Force (Partnership) in 2017, bringing together diverse representatives from across the Columbia Basin to establish a common vision and goals for the Basin and its salmon and steelhead. The diverse group of parties on the Partnership includes Columbia Basin tribes; fishing, agriculture, conservation, river transportation, port, and hydropower interests; and the states of Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Oregon. All of these parties want to ensure that healthy runs of salmon and steelhead thrive into the future. Meeting the needs of our diverse social, cultural, and economic landscape — while leaving future generations with abundant, resilient salmon and a healthy ecosystem — will take ingenuity, innovation, and partnership.

This report summarizes Partnership efforts and accomplishments through September 2020. An overarching message from Partnership members is a strong sense of urgency that immediate action is needed to address salmon and steelhead declines. This report provides recommendations for continuing collaboration going forward to further define and implement strategies to achieve the Partnership Goals. The report serves as the Partnership's final recommendations to the NOAA Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee.

Partnership Process and Approach

During Phase 1, the Partnership sought to build a common understanding of the need to increase salmon abundance and of the needs of the communities and ecosystems that depend on salmon. Partnership members explored the causes of salmon declines; shared their different experiences, perspectives, and interests; and developed constructive relationships out of mutual understanding and respect. Together, they found common ground, shaped an overarching Vision for the Columbia Basin, and crafted a set of shared Qualitative and provisional Quantitative Goals to reflect the Vision. This Vision and related Goals aspire to a Columbia Basin ecosystem with



Salmon Fry and Eggs. Credit: Shutterstock

thriving salmon and steelhead that are naturally persistent while also supporting the Basin’s social, cultural, and economic needs, including honoring tribal treaty and trust responsibilities. The Vision and set of Goals defined in Phase 1 provided the foundation for further exploration in Phase 2 of the Partnership process.

During Phase 2, the Partnership refined the provisional Quantitative Goals from Phase 1 and adopted a final set of Goals for the 27 stocks of salmon and steelhead in the Columbia Basin. The members then focused on exploring different pathways to achieve the set of Quantitative Goals. They developed a range of scenarios, or combinations of biological and other strategies that address different social, cultural, economic, and ecological considerations. The members understand that these different considerations often present significant challenges to

implementing actions for salmon and steelhead, and that sustainable solutions need to integrate these considerations into decisions about fish and habitat management. Together, the scenarios capture a range of choices for reaching desired Goals for salmon and steelhead across the Columbia Basin.

Looking forward, the Partnership recognizes that much more work is needed to define how best to achieve the Goals for salmon and steelhead over the short, medium, and long term. The Partnership emphasizes that a sustainable future for salmon and steelhead requires urgent action. With the Partnership Vision and Goals as building blocks, the next step is to set a course to achieve the Goals. Boldness and innovation are needed with respect to salmon management strategies and actions to meet the needs of salmon while maintaining healthy economies. The envisioned path forward promotes further exploration of the feasibility of specific actions, challenges to achieving success, innovative approaches, and other opportunities to achieve the Goals. The Partnership recommends continued collaboration to create a sense of collective ownership, increase transparency, and enhance public confidence in investments to rebuild salmon runs.



Snake River sockeye. Credit: Mike Peterson, Idaho Department of Fish and Game

Partnership Accomplishments

Over the last few years, the Partnership worked together to forge agreement on a long-term Vision for the Columbia Basin and a set of related Goals for salmon and steelhead. The group also explored different approaches to achieving the Goals, examined potential impacts of those approaches on people's lives and livelihoods, and developed key messages for future decision-makers. These important achievements set a constructive stage to define a path forward to actualize the Vision and achieve the Goals.

Vision for the Columbia Basin

The Partnership shaped a powerful Vision as a call for action:

A healthy Columbia 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.

Qualitative Goals

The Qualitative Goals capture different social, cultural, economic, and ecological values and describe desired outcomes throughout the Columbia Basin. The Goals call to:

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.

Together the Goals recognize a sense of urgency to help Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead now and well into the future.

Quantitative Goals

The Partnership's Quantitative Goals identify a range of abundance numbers for adult salmon and steelhead. Goals are identified for natural-origin ESA-listed and non-listed salmon and steelhead in the U.S. portion of the Columbia Basin and its tributaries, including many historical production areas that are currently blocked. The Goals are based, wherever possible, on goals from existing management plans. They account for ESA recovery goals, cultural needs of tribes, habitat constraints and potential, density dependence, fishing interests, tribal treaty and trust responsibilities, mitigation responsibilities, and other factors. The Partnership also quantified current and anticipated levels of hatchery production and current and potential harvest as reference points for related Qualitative Goals.

Biological Analyses

Biological analyses helped the Partnership understand factors that limit natural-origin Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead abundance and define potential pathways to increase abundance and achieve the Quantitative Goals. The Partnership explored the various limiting factors that impact salmon and steelhead across their life cycles. The results of the analyses show that no single strategy (e.g., reducing predation, increasing habitat, reducing harvest) will achieve the Goals on its own. Instead, improvements in multiple factors will be needed to increase abundance to desired levels for most stocks. Together, these improvements create synergies that compound benefits greater than those achievable through single actions. For example, improving smolt-to-adult survival will enable fish to better utilize existing habitats and take advantage of any future improvements in spawning and rearing habitats.

Social, Cultural, Economic, and Ecological Considerations

Learning from each other played an important role in the Partnership process as the group sought to integrate the “people side” of the Columbia Basin into discussions about the future of salmon. Partnership members described their communities, constituents, and experiences. Together, their stories highlight the complex mix of challenges and opportunities in the Basin, and also the collective interest in having sustainable salmon and steelhead runs and a healthy ecosystem.

Scenarios and Strategies

Partnership members developed different scenarios to explore alternative pathways to achieve the Goals. Together, the scenarios capture a range of choices and challenges confronting the region about how to reduce threats to achieve the Goals. Most scenarios describe biological strategies, but some scenarios include other components, such as analytical tools and steps to address social, cultural, economic, and ecological considerations. The Strategies chapter describes a range of possible strategies that could be used to help achieve the Goals. The exploration of different



Celebrating a summer Chinook from the Lower Columbia River. Credit: Liz Hamilton

scenarios and strategies, and their implications, contributed to the Partnership’s understanding and consideration of the different potential paths forward.

Partnership Recommended Path Forward

The Vision of the Columbia Basin Partnership Task Force — a sustainable future with thriving salmon and steelhead — provides a powerful mission for the people of the Columbia Basin and coming generations. Achieving this Vision and Goals for the Basin’s rivers, fish, and people will take all of us, working together. The envisioned path promotes exploration of opportunities, including innovative approaches, to achieve the Goals. Continued collaboration will be paramount. The enhanced understanding and positive working relationships established by the Partnership create a critical foundation to align the management decisions needed to move the Basin toward achieving the Vision and Goals.

Key Messages and Recommendations

The Partnership provided key messages to guide actions moving forward:

A Call to Action

Time is of the Essence. Since the late 1800s, immigrants to the Pacific Northwest changed the Columbia River Basin ecosystem at the expense of salmon. At the writing of this report, natural-origin fish runs are less than 10 percent of what they were historically. In some areas of the Basin, wild salmon and steelhead no longer exist. The status quo is unacceptable: without significant change, imperiled salmon and steelhead will disappear forever.

We Must Act Now with Urgency. If we take action now, we can reintroduce and return wild salmon and steelhead to abundance. Readers 20 years from now should be able to review the work of the Columbia Basin Partnership and see that 2020 was a turning point for the return of healthy and abundant salmon and steelhead to the Columbia River.

Salmon Will Indicate the Health of the Basin. The Partnership adopts this call to action: “A sustainable future with thriving salmon and steelhead that are indicators of clean and abundant water, reliable and clean energy, a robust regional economy, healthy watersheds, and vibrant cultural and spiritual traditions all interdependent and existing in harmony for generations to come.”

The Path Forward Needs a Salmon Ethic, Strong Leadership, and Collaboration
The Tribes, Salmon, and Ecosystem are Interconnected. This ethic should guide our collective pathway to implement Qualitative and Quantitative Goals, strategies, and actions to ensure we consider the impacts on salmon and steelhead and all parts of the ecosystem.

Leadership is Essential. Strong public resolve and leadership at every level are needed to prioritize salmon and steelhead, particularly with increasing and uncertain impacts from climate change and population growth. Integrating and aligning salmon management decisions, strategies, and actions is critical to maximize effectiveness, meet treaty rights and trust responsibilities, ensure strategic use of funds, and increase transparency.

Collaboration is Needed. Not all voices have been heard and respected. Problems exist. There are hard choices and decisions ahead of us. Conflict will happen and we will need to work through it. A structured forum where representatives of sovereigns and stakeholders

engage in direct dialogue is key to collaborative problem-solving. Success will be achieved when everyone joins together to implement a common set of actions. Collaboration is vital to identifying and implementing solutions.

Science Plus Accountability Delivers a Healthy Ecosystem and a Vibrant Quality of Life

Continuous Improvement and Innovation Moves Us Forward. We need to adapt how we live with salmon. The opportunity and challenge is to socially and economically innovate. Success requires bold action, risk-taking, learning from mistakes, and building on local successes.

Make Scientifically Based Decisions. Actions must be driven by science and informed by research that is inclusive of traditional ecological knowledge. Critical uncertainties must be resolved through adequately funded scientific experiments with rigorous monitoring and evaluation that remains adaptive to emerging information. Our scientifically based actions must enable the river to produce salmon and steelhead at the levels this Task Force has identified.

Benchmarks Provide Accountability. Using the Partnership Goals, we need to establish quantitative targets for each stock, with timeframes to measure progress, assess the impact of actions, adapt as needed, and respond to changing circumstances. Everyone in the Basin is responsible for the outcome.

Reliable and Predictable Funding is Essential. Funding must be targeted to achieve the Partnership’s Quantitative and Qualitative Goals. New funding sources should be identified. Funding must come from multiple sources, consider the burden across communities, and account for past, present, and potential impacts.



Coho Credit: John McMillan