



United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Mountain-Prairie Region

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Memorandum

To: Director (AES)

From: Regional Director, Region 6

Subject: 12-Month Finding for the Amended Petition to List the Westslope Cutthroat Trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*) as Threatened

Attached is the "Status Review for the Westslope Cutthroat Trout in the United States" for your review and concurrence.

The westslope cutthroat trout (WCT) is 1 of 14 subspecies of cutthroat trout (*O. clarki*) native to interior regions of western North America. The historic distribution of WCT in the United States consists of several major drainages of the upper Columbia River basin (Idaho and Montana), the Methow River and Lake Chelan drainages (Washington), the John Day River drainage (Oregon), the headwaters of the South Saskatchewan River (Montana), and the upper Missouri River basin (Montana and Wyoming). The historic range of WCT is the most widespread geographically among the 14 subspecies of inland cutthroat trout.

BACKGROUND

On June 6, 1997, we received a formal petition to list the WCT as threatened throughout its range pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The petitioners submitted an amended petition with additional information on January 28, 1998.

The petitioners assert that remaining, genetically pure stocks of WCT occur almost exclusively in small, isolated streams in mountainous areas, and that it is common for today's WCT stocks to have some degree of hybridization with introduced, nonnative trout. The petitioners further assert that stocks of WCT now occur in 11 percent of historic habitat in Idaho and 41 percent in Oregon, although data on genetic purity are not available for most stocks. The petitioners have little information on the status of native WCT stocks in Washington, although several stocks have been confirmed by recent studies. About half of the few streams in Wyoming that were historic habitat for WCT are now said by the petitioners to have stocks of this subspecies, but all were considered hybridized to some degree with stocked, nonnative trout.

The petitioners assert that the WCT should be listed as threatened because the subspecies' present distribution and abundance are substantially reduced from historic conditions; remaining stocks are small, widely separated, and continue to decline in abundance; and the threats to the survival of WCT are pervasive and ongoing. The petitioners allege that threats to WCT include habitat destruction from logging and associated road building; adverse effects on habitat resulting from livestock grazing, mining, urban development, agricultural practices, and the operation of dams; historic and ongoing stocking of nonnative fish species that compete with or prey upon WCT or jeopardize the genetic integrity of the subspecies through hybridization; and excessive harvest by anglers.

The petitioners further assert that programs to protect and restore WCT are inadequate or nonexistent, and that stocks of this fish continue to be threatened by a wide variety of ongoing and proposed activities.

STATUS REVIEW

On June 10, 1998, we published a notice of a 90-day finding concluding that the amended petition provided substantial information indicating that the listing of the WCT may be warranted (63 FR 31691). We promptly began a status review for WCT to assemble information needed to make a 12-month finding.

We subsequently received information pertinent to WCT from several State game and fish departments, the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, tribal governments, and private corporations, as well as private citizens, organizations, and other entities. We also reviewed information on WCT obtained from journal articles, agency reports, and file documents, telephone interviews and written correspondence with natural resources managers familiar with WCT, and other sources.

For the purposes of the status review, we evaluated WCT status solely on the basis of WCT stocks that presently occur within the historic range of the subspecies in the United States. In addition, we assumed that the fish stocks that the State game and fish departments classified as WCT represented that subspecies, even though the precise genetic characteristics of those stocks may not have been known, or the stocks consisted of intercross progeny that were the product of some low or nondetectable level of interbreeding between WCT and another fish species. Although WCT stocks with varying degrees of genetic purity are known to occur across the subspecies' range, there is presently no definitive information on the genetic characteristics of most WCT stocks. Even in Montana, where an extensive data base on the genetic characteristics of WCT exists, the precise genetic characteristics of most WCT stocks are unknown.

We found no compelling evidence in support of recognizing distinct population segments for WCT. Instead, a single WCT population was recognized for purposes of the status review. This subspecies presently inhabits about 4,275 tributaries or stream reaches that collectively encompass more than 23,000 linear miles of stream habitat, distributed among 12 major

drainages and 62 component watersheds in the Columbia, Missouri, and Saskatchewan River basins. In addition, WCT presently inhabit 6 lakes in Idaho and Washington and at least 20 lakes in Glacier National Park, Montana. Although WCT stocks that formerly occupied large, mainstem rivers and lakes and their principal tributaries across the subspecies' range are reduced from their historic levels, to a degree that cannot be determined precisely because definitive historic data are limited, we find that viable, self-sustaining WCT stocks remain widely distributed throughout the historic range of the subspecies, most notably in headwater areas.

Evidence from the Missouri River basin indicated that a conspicuous decline in WCT stocks occurred early in the 20th century. That decline was largely attributed to rapid, abundant colonization of mainstem rivers and their major tributaries by one or more introduced, nonnative fish species (e.g., brown trout (*Salmo trutta*) and rainbow trout (*O. mykiss*)) that had adverse effects on WCT. However, there also was evidence that many of the headwater streams inhabited by extant WCT stocks are relatively secure from colonization by nonnative fish species that are known to adversely affect WCT, because those headwater streams are not suitable habitat for the nonnative trout.

We found that most of the habitat for extant WCT stocks lies on lands administered by Federal Agencies, particularly the U.S. Forest Service. Moreover, many of the strongholds for WCT stocks occur within roadless or wilderness areas or national parks, all of which afford considerable protection to WCT. There are numerous Federal and State regulatory mechanisms that, if properly administered and implemented, protect WCT and their habitats throughout the range of the subspecies. In addition, the U.S. Forest Service, State game and fish departments, and National Park Service reported more than 700 ongoing projects directed toward the protection and restoration of WCT and their habitats. Finally, WCT accrue some level of protection from the ESA's section 7 consultation process in geographic areas where WCT distribution overlaps with the distributions of one or more ESA-listed fish species, specifically, bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*), steelhead (*O. mykiss*), and Pacific salmon (*Oncorhynchus*) species and their habitats on Federal lands in the Columbia River basin.

FINDING

On the basis of the available information, we conclude that the WCT is not likely to become a threatened or endangered species within the foreseeable future. Therefore, listing of the WCT as a threatened or endangered species under the ESA is not warranted at this time.

A draft notice regarding our finding is also attached for your review and prompt publication in the Federal Register. The petitioners will be notified of our finding upon its publication. If you require further information, please contact Mr. Lynn Kaeding at (406) 582-0717 or Mr. Chuck Davis at (303) 236-7400, extension 235.

Ralph Q. Moyerweck

Attachments

Approval *[Signature]*

Disapproval _____

Date 4/5/05

Date _____