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OSU: Columbia River Basin fish stocks fail to improve despite billions in conservation spending

31 July 2023

By Responsible Seafood Advocate

Study finds no evidence of an increase in naturally spawning fish

New research from Oregon State University shows that more than \$9 billion in inflation-adjusted tax dollars, spent over the course of four decades, has failed to improve stocks of wild salmon and steelhead in the state's Columbia River Basin.

Led by William Jaeger of the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences, the **study published today** (<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0289246>) in *PLOS One*, analyzes 50 years of data that suggests while hatchery-reared salmon numbers have increased, there is no evidence of a net increase in naturally spawning fish.

Jaeger notes that Columbia River Basin steelhead and Chinook, coho and sockeye salmon numbers have been under pressure for many decades due to overharvesting and then hydropower beginning in 1938 with the opening of Bonneville Dam.

"Also, farming, logging, mining and irrigation caused landscape changes and habitat degradation,



Efforts totaling more than \$9 billion have failed to improve stocks of salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River Basin, new research finds.

which compounded the problems for the fish,” said Jaeger, who estimates that 16 million salmon and steelhead once returned from the Pacific to the portions of the basin above Bonneville Dam, but by the 1970s there were fewer than 1 million.



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The Northwest Power Act of 1980 required fish and wildlife goals to be considered in addition to power generation and other objectives. The act created the Northwest Power and Conservation Council to set up conservation programs financed by Bonneville Power Administration revenues. The cost and scale of restoration efforts grew considerably in the 1990s, Jaeger said, following the listing of 12 Columbia River runs of salmon and steelhead as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

The taxpayer tab for conservation spending now exceeds \$9 billion in inflation-adjusted 2020 U.S. dollars, not including what's been spent by local governments and non-governmental agencies.

NOAA: 'Marine finfish aquaculture has no adverse impact on native species in Puget Sound'



NOAA has found that marine finfish aquaculture in Puget Sound has little to no negative impact on native species.



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"The actual impact of all of these efforts has always been poorly understood," Jaeger said. "Lots of people have long been concerned about a lack of evidence of salmon and steelhead recovery. One of the issues is that most studies evaluating restoration efforts have examined individual projects for specific species, life stages or geographic areas, which limits the ability to make broad inferences at the basin level."

So is there any boost in wild fish abundance that can be linked to recovery efforts? Based on a half-century of fish-return data at Bonneville Dam, the single entry point to the basin above the dam, Jaeger found "no evidence in the data that the restoration spending is associated with a net increase in wild fish abundance."

Read the full study. (<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0289246>)

@GSA_Advocate (https://twitter.com/GSA_Advocate)

Author



RESPONSIBLE SEAFOOD ADVOCATE

editor@globalseafood.org (<mailto:editor@globalseafood.org>)

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