



SUPPORT THE SPRINGER REVIVAL

RECOVERING A ROGUE RIVER ICON: WILD SPRING CHINOOK SALMON

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(LEFT)
Springer revival

PHOTO:
Justin Bailie

(RIGHT)
Upward trajectory
Rainie Falls,
Rogue River

PHOTO:
Tim Palmer

GRAPHIC:
Data from ODFW
Rogue Spring
Chinook Annual
Reports

Southern Oregon's Rogue River is home to one of the most famous Chinook salmon populations in the Pacific Northwest. Of these wild Chinook, the "Springers" are the crown jewel. It is their unique life history that sets these fish apart from neighboring populations, which are comprised of later returning, fall-run Chinook salmon. Between late winter and early summer, chrome-bright Springers blast through the Rogue's estuary, riding freshets upstream to the cool, deep pools of the upper river. They will hold in those pools, sometimes up to 5 months, until they are ready to spawn.

The history of commercial fishing for salmon on the Rogue dates back to the 1860s, when R.D. Hume operated a cannery near the river's mouth near the city of Gold Beach. More recently, the Rogue's legendary springers have pioneered a wave of aluminum drift boat manufacturers. Alumaweld, Willie Boats, Fish Rite, and Pavati have all built businesses around targeting these prized fish in the upper river. A 2009 economic report estimated that the Rogue's sport and commercial fishing brought in more than \$17 million annually, with the largest share going to Chinook salmon.¹

For all they bring to communities, the Rogue's wild, native fish have been hampered by more than a century of commercial and recreational harvest, habitat degradation from agriculture and mining, hatchery programs, and the loss of access to historic habitat because of dam construction. But thanks to a commitment from Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to protect the unique life history of this iconic species, we are seeing, in real time, how grassroots advocacy and science-based management can bring back a wild salmon population.

¹"The Economic Value of Rogue River Salmon." Commissioned by Save the Wild Rogue Campaign with funding support from Giles & Elise Mead Foundation. Prepared by ECONorthwest. 1/30/2009.

ROGUE WILD SPRING CHINOOK

Post-Conservation Plan



A Dam Briefing

Constructed for flood control and fisheries enhancement in 1977, William Jess Dam was built without fish passage and cut off spring Chinook from 20 miles, roughly one-third, of their critical spawning habitat. The 1980s and 1990s marked two decades of decline in wild spring Chinook abundance on the Rogue. In the early 1990s, the wild population plummeted. Where an average of 28,000 wild fish had returned before William Jess, the average run in the 1990s was just 7,600 Chinook.

Taking Action

Responding to the declining population, in 2004 ODFW convened a public advisory committee to develop a conservation plan to preserve and recover the struggling wild fish. Native Fish Society's Rogue River Steward, Peter Tronquet, served on the committee, alongside representatives from the Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, NOAA Fisheries, and sport-fishing guides. After 25 meetings over two years, the committee had a plan to save the Rogue River spring Chinook.

Oregon's Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted the plan in 2007. Following the advisory committee's recommendations,

the commission modified sport-fishing regulations, giving preferential treatment to early-run Chinook with the hope of achieving a 10-year average return of 15,000 wild adult fish. In spite of drought, El Nino, and three of the hottest years on record, the average return since the adoption of the plan is 8,905 wild fish and climbing. In 2015, an estimated 15,300 adult fish returned, surpassing the target return for the first time.

Looking Forward

A lot of noise has been made about poor returns of hatchery fish, but the real story on the Rogue is the upward trajectory of our wild spring Chinook population. A wild, native fish population is restoring itself, and Rogue managers, ODFW biologists, members of the advisory committee, and Rogue River Steward Peter Tronquet deserve our gratitude for protecting the diversity of this iconic wild fish.

A 10-year status review of the Rogue Spring Chinook Conservation Plan is coming up in 2017 and Native Fish Society will continue to work with ODFW and our local partners on the Rogue. We can't afford to revert to dead-end strategies like increased hatchery production, hatch boxes, and trap-and-haul programs. Instead, let's stay focused on science-based solutions. 