

partnerships will be successful only if all watershed stakeholders (i.e., state, tribal, and local governments, landowner representatives, and Federal and nonfederal biologists) participate and share the goal of restoring coho salmon to the watersheds. To assist with such efforts, NMFS, the USFWS and the EPA, with technical assistance from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, have contracted a study to provide technical guidance and training to agency staff. This guidance is intended to produce a technical foundation and informational support base for fostering development of conservation plans pursuant to section 10 of the ESA and cooperative agreements with the states of Washington, Oregon, and California, pursuant to section 6 of the ESA. Furthermore, NMFS intends to enlist nonfederal jurisdictions, including tribal and county governments, private organizations and affected individuals in recovery plan development and implementation.

Critical Habitat

Section 4(a)(3)(A) of the ESA requires that, to the extent prudent and determinable, critical habitat be designated concurrently with the listing of a species. However, this section of the ESA specifically precludes NMFS from designating critical habitat in foreign countries, e.g., Canada. While NMFS has completed its initial analysis of the biological status of coho salmon populations from southern British Columbia to southern California, it has not completed the analysis necessary for designating critical habitat. Therefore, to avoid delaying this listing proposal, NMFS will propose critical habitat in a separate rulemaking. Also, NMFS is nearing completion of a coastwide status review of steelhead (*O. mykiss*) populations, a species that has similar habitat requirements and considerable geographic overlap with coho salmon. Hence, a delay will allow NMFS to more clearly and efficiently identify proposed critical habitat for threatened or endangered ESUs of both species.

Public Comments Solicited

To ensure that the final action resulting from this proposal will be as accurate and as effective as possible, NMFS is soliciting comments and suggestions from the public, other concerned governmental agencies, the scientific community, industry, and any other interested parties. Public hearings will be held in various locations throughout the range of the proposed ESUs; details regarding locations, dates, and times will be published in a forthcoming Federal Register document.

NMFS is requesting information regarding: (1) The existence of native, naturally-reproducing coho salmon in the proposed ESUs, especially the lower Columbia River/southwest Washington coast ESU, and in the Puget Sound/Strait of Georgia ESU; (2) trends in adult size of native, naturally-reproducing fish, especially in the Puget Sound/Strait of Georgia ESU; (3) progeny/parent return ratios for naturally-reproducing fish, both before and after harvest; (4) coho salmon escapement, particularly escapement data partitioned into natural and hatchery components; (5) the proportion of naturally-reproducing fish that were reared as juveniles in a hatchery; (6) the reproductive success of naturally-reproducing hatchery fish (i.e. hatchery fish spawning in the wild); (7) straying rates of hatchery fish to other hatcheries and into natural populations; (8) efforts being made to protect native, naturally-reproducing populations of coho salmon in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California; and (9) suggestions for specific regulations under section 4(d) of the ESA that could apply to one or more ESUs of coho salmon proposed as threatened. Suggested regulations should address activities, plans, or guidelines that, despite their potential to result in the incidental take of listed fish, will ultimately promote the conservation of threatened ESUs.

In addition to comments on the proposal concerning the biological status of the stocks, NMFS is soliciting suggestions and proposals on conservation measures that might best achieve the purposes of the ESA relating to recovering the health of coho salmon populations and the ecosystems upon which they depend. These conservation measures include: (1) The best approach to integrate federal efforts with state and local efforts on habitat protection and restoration, harvest management regimes and hatchery production programs; (2) the best method to integrate and encourage private efforts at habitat protection and restoration, and the most effective role of NMFS and other federal agencies for promoting private conservation efforts for purposes of achieving the goals of the ESA; (3) the role of successful local watershed protection programs in the larger conservation effort, and the best mechanisms to encourage these efforts; (4) the most appropriate mechanisms for integrating existing harvest management regimes with the needs of coho salmon populations proposed for listing; and, (5) the most effective mechanisms for instituting necessary reforms in the

hatchery production practices to support the recovery effort while achieving other related objectives of the existing programs.

NMFS also is requesting quantitative evaluations describing the quality and extent of freshwater and marine habitats for juvenile and adult coho salmon as well as information on areas that may qualify as critical habitat in Washington, Oregon, and California for the proposed ESUs. Areas that include the physical and biological features essential to the recovery of the species should be identified. Areas outside the present range should also be identified if such areas are essential to the recovery of the species. Essential features should include, but are not limited to: (1) Space for individual and population growth, and for normal behavior; (2) food, water, air, light, minerals, or other nutritional or physiological requirements; (3) cover or shelter; (4) sites for reproduction and rearing of offspring; and (5) habitats that are protected from disturbance or are representative of the historic geographical and ecological distributions of the species.

For areas potentially qualifying as critical habitat, NMFS is requesting information describing: (1) The activities that affect the area or could be affected by the designation, and (2) the economic costs and benefits of additional requirements of management measures likely to result from the designation.

The economic cost to be considered in the critical habitat designation under the ESA is the probable economic impact "of the [critical habitat] designation upon proposed or ongoing activities" (50 CFR 424.19). NMFS must consider the incremental costs specifically resulting from a critical habitat designation that are above the economic effects attributable to listing the species. Economic effects attributable to listing include actions resulting from section 7 consultations under the ESA to avoid jeopardy to the species and from the taking prohibitions under section 9 of the ESA. Comments concerning economic impacts should distinguish the costs of listing from the incremental costs that can be directly attributed to the designation of specific areas as critical habitat.

NMFS will review all public comments and any additional information regarding the status of the coho salmon ESUs described herein and, as required under the ESA, intends to complete a final rule within 1 year of this proposed rule. The availability of new information may cause NMFS to reassess the status of any coho salmon ESU, including ESUs not proposed for