

U.S. salmon plan earns perfect score

Tuesday, June 05, 2007 - Bangor Daily News

BANGOR — The U.S. has received a perfect score from a group that graded countries on their plans to save wild Atlantic salmon from extinction, thanks in part to the aggressive campaign to restore the fish in Maine waters.

The vast majority of the 18 nations involved in salmon restoration, however, received lukewarm to low grades on their written plans to restore salmon.

Representatives of several conservation groups called on all participating nations to develop better plans while increasing funding to reverse the alarming drops in wild Atlantic salmon populations.

"We're talking about some of the richest countries in the world here and one of the most iconic fish species in the world," said Tom Grasso, director of the international fisheries conservation program for the World Wildlife Fund. "If we can't save the Atlantic salmon, it does not bode well for some of the other fish species around the world that we are trying to protect."

Grasso joined representatives of the Atlantic Salmon Federation in discussing the report card on Monday, one day before an international conference on salmon conservation convened in Bar Harbor.

Diplomats and biologists from more than a dozen countries are expected to attend the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization's annual meeting. Formed by international treaty in 1983, NASCO promotes international collaboration in managing and restoring Atlantic salmon stocks throughout the species' range.

In advance of the meeting, NASCO's 18 member nations were required to submit "implementation plans" detailing how they intended to protect salmon stocks or habitat along with goals and timelines.

A panel of NASCO representatives then reviewed those plans against more than a dozen criteria, including the quality of conservation, monitoring and evaluation plans as well as how comprehensive the nation had surveyed its wild salmon stocks.

The U.S. and England and Wales fared best, scoring 13 out of 13. Norway scored a 12.

Andy Goode, vice president of U.S. programs for the Atlantic Salmon Federation, said while salmon recovery in the U.S. is slow, he believes the country is showing its commitment to the restoration. As proof, Goode pointed to a \$50 million cooperative effort to remove several dams in the Penobscot River while increasing hydroelectric production.

Canada and Scotland — two nations renowned for salmon angling, even today — scored a seven and a three, respectively. France, Germany and Portugal registered as zeros because they never submitted plans.

NASCO delegates offered varied opinions on the scores' significance.

Chris Poupard, chairman of the group of nongovernmental organizations that are NASCO members, including the World Wildlife Fund and the Atlantic Salmon Federation, said some countries were great about describing their salmon populations but were weak on conservation goals and actions.

Poupard plans to raise those concerns during debate at today's meetings, most of which are closed to the public and the media. He said other countries should use the plans from the U.S., England and Wales and Norway as models when submitting next year's plans.

"We're going to be pointing out all of these deficiencies in these plans and we are going to demand that these countries do much better," Poupard said at a press conference held Monday at Husson College.

But NASCO President Ken Whelan cautioned against reading too much into the scores, which he said are gauging the completeness of the written plan, not a country's conservation efforts.

Because this was the first year the plans were required, the most important thing was getting the process in place, Whelan said in an interview. This week's discussion should help clarify what will be expected in the future.

The next big step will be to begin evaluating how countries are doing relative to their stated goals, he said.

"We're only at the very first stage of the implementation process. We want to get the format right," Whelan said.

George LaPointe, commissioner of the Maine Department of Marine Fisheries, agreed that the scores are only measuring plan completeness, not conservation.

"Lower scores don't mean other countries are doing poorly on salmon," LaPointe said.

Indeed, while the U.S. had a perfect score, the country's salmon stocks remain poor.

Less than 1,500 adult, sea-run salmon returned to U.S. waters to spawn last year — a fraction of the amount biologists say is needed to truly rebuild the population.

The only bright spot for the U.S., if one can be identified, is the Penobscot River, which accounted for more than 1,000 of the returning adults.

Many former salmon rivers in New England have no returning fish at all.

Canada, by contrast, still has strong returns on such rivers as the Miramichi and Restigouche. Likewise, rivers in Russia and in North Atlantic countries are seeing much smaller population declines than experienced in the U.S.

Scientists believe a major factor in the continued population declines of Atlantic salmon, especially in North America, is the high mortality rates once salmon leave the freshwater rivers of their birth and enter the oceans. Only a tiny fraction return to spawn years later.

NASCO has launched an international effort to decipher the ocean mortality puzzle.