

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Salmon River Restoration Council • Karuk Tribe

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CALIFORNIA ADDS KLAMATH SPRING SALMON TO ENDANGERED SPECIES LIST

Modern Technology combined with Ancient Knowledge Inform Decision

Sacramento, CA – Today the California Fish and Game Commission ruled unanimously to add Upper Klamath Trinity Spring Chinook to the California Endangered Species List.

“We are elated that the Commission recognized the unique characteristics, cultural importance and true peril of Klamath River Spring Chinook,” said Salmon River Restoration Council (SRRC) director Karuna Greenberg. “Tribes and grassroots activists have worked tirelessly for decades to preserve this iconic fish, and now we have a better chance at accomplishing that goal.”

The Karuk Tribe and SRRC jointly filed a petition to list Spring Chinook with the Commission in August 2018. The petition is based on the discovery of the genetic sequence that defines Spring Chinook as distinct from the more abundant Fall Chinook. That [data was published](#) in 2017 by UC Davis Professor Michael Miller and colleagues.

Adding Spring Chinook to the CA Endangered Species List will allow agencies to prioritize funding for restoration and ensure any projects in the fish’s range will have to avoid adverse impacts to the population.

Spring Chinook enter rivers in the spring when snow melt swells rivers allowing the fish to travel into the upper reaches of a watershed. Then they must reside in cold water areas all summer until they spawn and die in the fall. Fall Chinook migrate into rivers in the fall where they spawn and die relatively soon after entering fresh water. “Having two life strategies allow Chinook to take advantage of the entire watershed instead of just the upper or lower reaches,” explains Toz Soto, Senior Fisheries Biologist for the Karuk Tribe. “This behavioral diversity enhances the odds for long-term survival for the entire population.”

However, until Miller published his findings, the conventional wisdom of fisheries managers was that Fall and Spring Chinook were the same animal despite the differences in behavior. It was not until new scientific instruments and methods were developed that scientists could find the small but very significant changes in DNA sequence that result in the two fish having fundamentally different life histories.

The Karuk and other tribes that have depended on Spring Chinook for sustenance for millennia already knew the two fish were not the same animal. “These fish have different names, are used in different ceremonial events, they even taste different. I’m pleased to see western science finally

catching up to traditional ecological knowledge,” noted Karuk Chairman Russell ‘Buster’ Attebery.

The population of Chinook salmon that swims up the Klamath River in the spring once numbered in the hundreds of thousands. In recent years, surveyors at the Salmon River Cooperative Spring Chinook and Summer Steelhead Population Snorkel Survey have counted only a couple hundred individuals in the Salmon River, which hosts the last viable wild run of these fish in the Klamath Basin.

“We thank the Commissioners for listening to the Tribe’s concerns and traditional knowledge in their decision to accept our petition. California is on the right track when it comes to working with Tribes,” noted Karuk traditional dip net fishermen and council member Troy Hockaday.

Spring Chinook advocates currently have January 2023 circled on their calendars. That’s when the removal of the lower four Klamath River dams is slated to begin pursuant to an historic agreement between dam owner PacifiCorp, California, Oregon, Tribes, and conservation groups. The project would be the largest salmon restoration project in US history. For Spring Chinook and the Karuk Tribe, it can’t come soon enough.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is currently considering a similar petition from Karuk and SRRC to list on the federal ESA.

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Editor’s notes:

To learn more about the Karuk Tribe go to www.karuk.us

To learn more about Klamath dam removal see <http://www.klamathrenewal.org/>