

HB 2286, to provide additional support for salmon runs near recovery or extinction

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Key Findings

1. **Targeting salmon recovery funding in Washington has been caught between two strategies: funding all salmon runs or target runs near extinction or recovery.**
2. **Currently the state has prioritized funding all salmon runs in a strategy called “no watershed left behind.”**
3. **This misses opportunities to focus funding on salmon runs where a bit extra would prevent extinction or push a run over the threshold to recovery.**
4. **HB 2286 creates a fund in the Capital Budget to provide additional resources for those watersheds that could benefit from further attention without taking away from other watersheds.**
5. **Although it is targeted to certain high-priority salmon runs, grants would be allocated to projects using science-based metrics.**

Introduction

As populations of salmon and steelhead continue to struggle in Washington state, existing funding programs have focused on ensuring we don't lose ground with existing populations. While important, that philosophy – sometimes called the “no watershed left behind” concept – makes it difficult to put additional focus on salmon runs that are near recovery or those that are at risk of extinction.

The tension between spreading the available money to all salmon runs or targeting those areas with more immediate needs has created conflict over how the limited amount of salmon recovery funding should be spent.

A proposal to create a targeted fund within the Capital Budget for salmon and steelhead populations that need additional help would

fill this need. HB 2286 would focus additional funding on populations that scientific assessment indicates are near a threshold.

Rather than just adding more money into existing programs, HB 2286 would address a disagreement about where to focus our efforts and potentially help some salmon runs cross the sustainability threshold and achieve recovery.

Creating a grant program to support recovery of salmon and steelhead

The bill has three key elements.

First, HB 2286 would recognize that salmon are struggling to recover and “the existing, broad-based approach to salmon and steelhead recovery has spread limited resources too thin and the state has not achieved adequate progress for many listed stocks of salmon and steelhead.”

As a result, the bill would create the “high-risk salmon and steelhead capital grant program,” that would fund grants “in the most long-term habitat benefit for the high-risk stocks.” Which salmon stocks are considered “high-risk” would be determined by an advisory committee using scientific data to determine which salmon runs are “at highest risk of extinction,” stocks “at highest risk of being listed” under the Endangered Species Act, or salmon runs “closest to delisting.”

Additional funding from the Capital Budget would be provided to implement the legislation.

Helping targeted salmon stocks cross the recovery finish line

While much of the news about salmon recovery in Washington state is not good, there are some bright spots. The 2022 Washington State of Salmon in Watersheds report lists Hood Canal Summer Chum as approaching the goal of recovery – one of only two runs in the state with

that positive status.¹ Delisting would be a major environmental victory after decades of effort.

These are the types of runs that HB 2286 is designed to target. With existing salmon recovery funds, Hood Canal Summer Chum would have to compete with other projects for funding. The focus provided by the legislation could fund the final pieces of habitat that would aid in a delisting victory.

Targeting particular watersheds would complement the existing strategy of spreading money across the state. There are a few reasons why Washington salmon recovery funding has been allocated this way up to this point.

First, it is less expensive to preserve existing habitat than to restore habitat that has been lost due to development or other factors. As a result, protecting intact habitat, even in areas where salmon populations are far from recovery, is a good use of limited funding because it prevents more costly restoration of that habitat in the future. Because these opportunities are not predictable, funding ends up across the Puget Sound and state, focused on the best habitat opportunities rather than focusing on particular salmon runs. This is a good use of limited resources but makes it difficult to provide targeted support.

Second, some rural watersheds – often where the best habitat remains – need state support to fund their operations. Redirecting existing funding to targeted salmon runs could leave some salmon recovery programs where runs are not in immediate danger without the funding to work effectively. A fund that specifically targeted watersheds with opportunity would avoid the problem of robbing Peter to pay Paul. The additional, targeted funding would also make sure small or underfunded watersheds continue to receive support even if recovery for the runs in their area is still many years away.

Using science to allocate salmon recovery funding

We have warned about the growth of salmon-recovery funding programs targeted to specific types of habitat chosen by legislators rather than allocated based on a scientific assessment. The

approach of this legislation does not trigger that concern. The decision about whether to target species near recovery or extinction, as opposed to spreading funding around, is a question of politics and economics, not science. There are valid scientific arguments for maintaining all salmon runs as well as targeting some with extra attention. The decision about how to balance those two goals is a question of allocation of resources. The projects ultimately funded by the new grant program would be chosen using science-based prioritization.

Some will object to the amount of funding proposed by this legislation. Washington's state budget has increased significantly in recent years, often rising at double-digit percentage rates, and many – including Washington Policy Center – believe there should be tax relief. Finding the right funding balance is a larger question about the priority of this and other programs. We do believe that this program is a valuable addition to the state's salmon recovery. The particular funding level can certainly be debated, but this program serves a targeted, well-defined need and would increase the chances of recovering salmon in the state.

Further, de-listing one or two salmon populations would provide Washington with a much-needed policy victory and would increase public support for salmon recovery by showing that environmental project funding can succeed.

Conclusion

Salmon populations have struggled to recover in Washington over the last two decades, in part because there is a tension between trying to save all salmon runs and targeting funding where it can be most impactful. HB 2286 would address that problem by providing a specific fund that can help prevent extinction or, more promisingly, give some runs the extra support they need to recover fully and be de-listed.

After two decades of frustration and missed salmon recovery targets, HB 2286 can help make progress and improve populations to benefit orca, tribes, sport and commercial fishers, and all Washington residents who care about the recovery of these important species.

Adoption of HB 2193 would be a step in the right direction for salmon populations and would demonstrate that the legislature values salmon recovery over bureaucratic inertia.

Todd Myers is the Director of the Center for the Environment.

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¹ "Salmon Status – State of Salmon," Governor's Salmon Recovery Office, <https://stateofsalmon.wa.gov/executive-summary/salmon-status/>