

POLICY NOTE

We should follow the science to support salmon recovery. But how?

By Todd Myers, Director, Center for Environment

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Key Findings

1. Puget Sound Chinook salmon are not recovering, and we do not yet know why.
2. The success of salmon recovery efforts varies from place to place. For example, it's been improving in the Skagit River while the situation in the Snoqualmie is getting worse.
3. The range of possible salmon recovery projects is based on science, but due to scientific uncertainty, the prioritization of these projects becomes political.
4. Decisions about salmon-recovery funding should be made closest to the community they affect to improve accountability and use local knowledge.
5. For political reasons, grantmaking agencies feel obliged to spend time and money showing they made the right decision, adding needless bureaucracy and wasting money that could be better spent on the ground.
6. Salmon recovery will likely face budget cuts. One way to mitigate those cuts is to streamline the existing process for delivering funding to salmon-recovery projects across the state.

Populations of Puget Sound Chinook salmon are not recovering, and we don't really know why.

The Puget Sound Partnership set a target to improve Chinook populations in the Sound by 2020. We will miss that target. Everyone agrees that part of the problem is a lack of funding – a problem that will get worse due to the coronavirus lockdown and economic downturn.

Still, scientists working with state and Indian tribes are not sure why we have not made more progress with the efforts we have been able to make. Those of us on the Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Council are counting on scientists to help us understand why.

The struggle to figure out why we have not been more successful is instructive for policymakers who want to use good science. It can also help the public understand those times when politicians claim their decisions are based in science and when they are not.

To understand what is happening in Puget Sound, the Salmon Science Advisory Group (SSAG) is looking at five potential reasons for poor salmon recovery. Those reasons include: we are doing the right things, but it will take more time; we have not done enough; we are not taking the right actions in the right places; our progress is being offset by habitat degradation elsewhere; we just do not have enough information. Many of these factors can be true simultaneously. Sorting out which are driving our failure is more difficult.

The problem may vary from place to place. The Skagit River is moving in the right direction, with populations increasing. Conditions in the Snoqualmie, on the other hand, are getting worse, perhaps due to pressure from other factors.

The research is still in progress, but the scientists – very good scientists – are circumspect about what they expect to find. They stress the uncertainty. They say the underlying issue may not be what is most important, but that some steps must come before others.

When asked a direct question about whether they will be able to give us enough information to make useful decisions, the scientists hedge.

As one of the decisionmakers on the Salmon Recovery Council, here is where this leaves me.

First, I am happy they are sticking to what they know – taking care not to pretend they are certain, rather than injecting their own personal opinions and pretending it is “science.” Still, I see the problem with being too cautious. Scientists have a sense of what is going on, even if the evidence is not perfect, and sharing an informed view is important as long as they make it clear where the line between certainty and educated opinion lies.

Second, how important is precision when so much needs to be done? If ten buildings are on fire, do we really need to stop and figure out which one or two are the most important to save? Putting the fires out is the key, and the order in which we put them out might not make much difference. The same may be true with salmon recovery.

If we can fund only two projects a year and we have ten to choose from, it might be more effective to draw names from a hat than spend time and money on research that says all of them are important. Frankly, that’s probably the situation we are in right now.

We will never do that, however. Why? Because we have to claim “science” is on our side, so we add process to show that we are smart. The salmon do not really care if we show our work, but politicians and the public do, so we spend time and money on false precision.

Third, when there is uncertainty, politicians fill that vacuum with – shockingly – politics. If the “science” says each of several projects have merit, politicians use ideology as their tie breaker. They ask which project has “shovel-ready” jobs? Which projects promote “social justice,” (however that is defined)? Which projects are located in important legislative districts? The database of salmon-recovery projects, by the way, helpfully indicates in which legislative and congressional district each one is located.

The vaguer these goals, the more latitude politicians have to make decisions based on politics rather than measurable science. For example, at a recent meeting of the Salmon Recovery Council, one activist pushing to use social justice to prioritize restoration projects, defined social justice as “an emergent result of the projects we do which depends on how we do our projects, who we do them with, and most importantly who benefits from our projects - not a separate project into itself. It’s a reorientation of values and ethics as we do our work.” That can mean virtually anything, which is exactly what politicians want. Anything they come up with can be linked back to and justified by an amorphous description.

As a result, the projects are not really prioritized on science anymore but on political goals. If job-creation is the tiebreaker, then it – and only it – becomes the key factor when scientific uncertainty means all projects are roughly equivalent.

Those of us who support salmon recovery projects feel obliged to play the game, finding ways to show that projects can meet these new, purportedly secondary goals. Instead of focusing on salmon, our attention is diverted to politics and pandering to whatever metric we think will help.

And the science fades into the background.

The incentives to misuse science are not going to change. The claim to be following the “science” has become the closest weapon to hand for many politicians who find it difficult to make more complicated arguments that reveal ideological biases. We can, however, counterbalance those incentives.



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Decisions about salmon-recovery funding should be made closest to the community they affect. This helps improve decision-making in two ways.

First, there is more accountability at the local level. State agencies in Olympia do not have the capability to thoughtfully audit every project to determine what worked and what did not. As a result, they cannot go back and hold people accountable for anything but the most egregious errors.

Those same grantmaking agencies – whether from Olympia or the EPA – feel obliged to spend time and money showing they made the right decision. Not only does this add needless bureaucracy and waste money that could be better spent on the ground, it makes them less likely to acknowledge that a project failed. Agency managers whose fingerprints are on a project are unlikely to admit they made a mistake and to undermine their own authority.

Second, while it may not classify as science, local decision making allows those with first-hand knowledge and experience to apply it to make local projects more effective. People with local experience may have difficulty convincing those making grants that this knowledge is important. That information, however, empowers salmon advocates at the local level helps use limited funding productively.

There is evidence this approach works. Some of the most innovative approaches to salmon recovery are practiced by tribal communities, who have more local control and leeway to innovate.

These points will not resolve all the threats to using science in a way that promotes salmon recovery. There will still be pressure to add political agendas into the calculus. There will still be mistakes. If those mistakes, however, are caused by substituting politics for science, it will be more difficult for local decision makers to point the finger of blame elsewhere and the urgency of getting it right the next time will increase.

As the legislature considers cuts to the overall state budget, it is likely that salmon recovery will face reductions like every other program. One way to mitigate those cuts is to streamline the existing process for delivering funding to salmon-recovery projects across the state, putting money on the ground rather than in process that has the unintended consequence of undermining the application of sound science. After all, improving habitat and helping populations recover, not funding politics and process, is the reason the salmon recovery program exists.