



Salmon in Peril

Bush Administration Rollbacks of Salmon Protection in Northwestern Forests

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION IS WEAKENING RULES GOVERNING LOGGING AND OTHER HARMFUL ACTIVITIES ON NATIONAL FORESTS OF THE CASCADE AND COASTAL MOUNTAINS IN WASHINGTON, OREGON AND NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. THESE CHANGES WOULD TURN BACK THE CLOCK ON FOREST PROTECTION AND RE-IGNITE THE TIMBER WARS OF THE 1980S. AT THE HEART OF THESE CHANGES IS THE AQUATIC CONSERVATION STRATEGY—A POTENTIALLY POWERFUL TOOL FOR RESTORING THE ONCE GREAT SALMON RUNS OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST.

PROTECTIONS AT RISK

The Aquatic Conservation Strategy (ACS) is a scientifically based framework for ensuring that logging will not damage salmon watersheds. It recognized the destructive impacts of bad logging practices—particularly clearcutting on steep slopes, fragile soils, and in streamside corridors. In the past, such logging practices have choked salmon streams with sediment, caused landslides that dump mud and debris on salmon spawning beds, raised stream temperatures, and precipitated a decline in salmon populations.

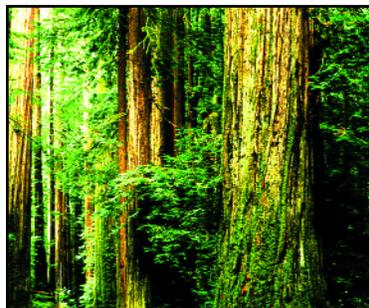
When President Clinton convened a Forest Conference to develop "scientifically sound" and "ecologically credible" management of western ancient forests in 1993, over 100 of the region's fish stocks had already become extinct, and more than 300 stocks faced a moderate to high risk of extinction because of low or declining numbers.

Dr. Jim Sedell, a Forest Service fisheries biologist, who was instrumental in developing the Aquatic Conservation Strategy, pointed out:

"The best habitat that remains, remains on public lands, and that land . . . is probably some of the most fragile parts of the landscape that we have left... The protection of the best habitat of what we have left is going to be crucial to anchor the maintenance and recovery of these stocks."

The Aquatic Conservation Strategy responded to the decline of Pacific salmon. It is designed to maintain and restore functional habitat for salmon and other aquatic species. It does this by managing public forests on a watershed-wide basis, and prohibiting timber sales and other projects that do not maintain existing conditions or lead to improved watershed conditions. The Strategy includes:

- ◆ establishing streamside buffers where logging generally may not occur
- ◆ performing watershed analyses to create a scientific record to direct logging and restoration activities
- ◆ protecting key watersheds containing fish strongholds or priority restoration areas
- ◆ encouraging comprehensive and pro-active watershed restoration to speed ecosystem recovery



Galen Rowell/Mountain Light

The courts have upheld the strategy, but have cautioned that it must be faithfully applied to remain legal. In upholding the strategy as part of the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994, Judge William Dwyer cautioned:

"If the plan as implemented is to remain lawful the monitoring, watershed analysis, and mitigating steps called for by the [Record of Decision] will have to be faithfully carried out, and adjustments made if necessary."

"As written, it is legally sufficient. It remains, of course, to be carried out."

Another decision upholding the strategy under the Endangered Species Act in 1998 emphasized that all projects must be "in compliance with the ACS objectives, fully applying watershed analysis and implementing monitoring programs."

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION WEIGHS IN

The Bush administration wants to get more timber cut from our national forests and other public lands in the Northwest. The ACS salmon and watershed protections stand in the way.

In March 2004, the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management completed an overhaul of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy, a decision that resulted from an intense lobbying campaign by the timber industry. Weakening the Aquatic Conservation Strategy is the last stage of a comprehensive plan demanded by the industry to increase logging in Northwest forests.

Before making its changes, the administration asked the scientists who developed the protections whether they thought the weakened ACS conformed to the original intent of the Northwest Forest Plan. The scientists said it did not conform, but the administration never disclosed their views. Instead, it made the contrary claim that the harmful changes were in fact consistent with the scientists' original recommendations.

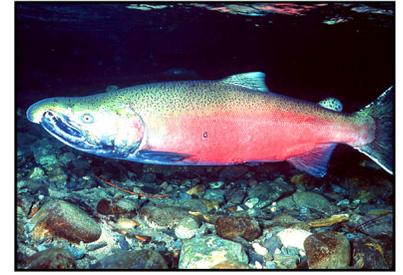
In 2004, Earthjustice filed a lawsuit challenging the rollback of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy on behalf of a coalition of fishing and conservation groups. The lawsuit challenges the administration's suppression of the dissenting views of the framers of the ACS, its failure to ensure that logging and roadbuilding on the Pacific Northwest forests will not jeopardize salmon survival, its misrepresentation of the impacts of the changes, and its refusal to look at the cumulative impacts on salmon and watersheds of the logging, roadbuilding, and other degrading activities.

The Bush administration's changes to the ACS would:

- ◆ Abolish the core requirement of the Strategy—that logging and other activities must be conducted in a manner that protects aquatic habitat and keeps the watershed on the path to recovery. The Bush administration candidly states that it will no longer need to find that each timber sale will do its part to protect salmon habitat and water quality. Meeting the ACS objectives and heeding watershed analysis findings would instead become optional. These changes would take "ecosystem" out of ecosystem management.

- ◆ Strip the Aquatic Conservation Strategy of all but the few rules that protect streamside forests. In forested areas outside the streamside reserves, logging could proceed without considering the impacts on the watershed. This change ignores the very real and often severe damage to aquatic environments caused by extensive clear-cutting on steep slopes and fragile soils outside the streamside reserves.

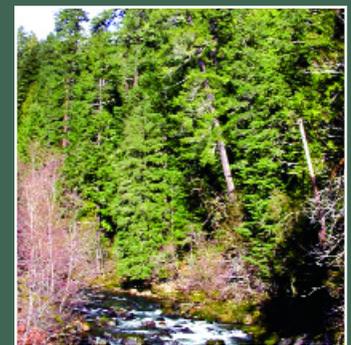
- ◆ Eliminate mechanisms to identify and curtail destruction of salmon habitat from cumulative effects of multiple timber sales and activities that degrade water quality. Abandoning these safeguards opens the door to "death by a thousand cuts." Northwest salmon populations will suffer from the cumulative effects of numerous destructive activities in a watershed over time.



The rollback of salmon protections will unleash a frenzy of destructive logging. The courts blocked several dozen timber sales because they would degrade salmon habitat in violation of the Aquatic Conservation Strategy. Many of these sales would have degraded watersheds that already had been heavily impacted by past clearcutting and roadbuilding. Others would have disturbed pristine areas critical to supporting salmon strongholds. Under the Bush administration's radically weakened Aquatic Conservation Strategy these ruinous sales could go forward.

Case Study: Christopher Folley Timber Sale

One example of a highly destructive timber sale under a greatly weakened ACS is the Christopher Folley Timber Sale in the Canton Creek watershed. Located in the Cascade Mountains east of Roseburg, Oregon, the forests of the Canton Creek watershed were designated a Key Watershed under the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994. Key watersheds are supposed to receive the highest priority for watershed restoration under the Northwest Forest plan. Canton Creek got this designation because, in spite of past logging, it still serves as an important spawning ground for Umpqua cutthroat trout, coastal coho salmon and steelhead. The federal Bureau of Land Management has plans to clearcut 215 acres of mature old growth forests.



Site of the proposed Christopher Folley Timber Sale. (Francis Eatherington)