

North Coast Salmon Project – Executive Report

December 2020

Introduction

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife's (CDFW) North Coast Salmon Project (NCSP) was developed in 2018 as a part of the Sustainable Funding Program. Initially, the NCSP was to receive limited-term funding through April 2021; however, the Project was awarded permanent funding in July 2020. The NCSP is collaborative in nature, with direct involvement of the restoration community, and aims to enhance the recovery of endangered Coho Salmon of California's north coast. The NCSP is led by an advisory team composed of CDFW program managers and supervisors from Regions 1 and 3 and Fisheries Branch in addition to leaders from several partner non-governmental organizations (NGO). These partner NGOs include California Trout, Trout Unlimited, Salmonid Restoration Federation, The Nature Conservancy, and California Resource Conservation Districts.

The overall goal of the NCSP is to evaluate the effectiveness of past Coho Salmon recovery efforts, identify actions that will expedite and enhance Coho Salmon recovery on California's north coast, and provide recommendations on how all CDFW programs work to support recovery. Four main objectives were identified to achieve this goal and guide the efforts of the NCSP. These objectives are to be met through coordinated efforts of NCSP staff in collaboration with other CDFW programs, stakeholders, government agencies, and the restoration community. The NCSP objectives are as follows:

1. Evaluate recovery actions from the CDFW's 2004 Recovery Strategy for California Coho Salmon and Priority Action Coho Team (PACT) report that have been completed to date and collaborate with regional watershed groups/partners to identify priority recovery efforts to implement moving forward utilizing PACT recommendations and the Salmon Habitat Restoration Priorities (SHaRP) process.
2. Evaluate current habitat, population, and effectiveness monitoring efforts and utilize these efforts to guide recovery actions.
3. Evaluate CDFW programs that affect the implementation of restoration actions and progress towards Coho Salmon recovery and develop recommendations on how to increase internal and external efficiencies and collaboration within and between these programs.
4. Evaluate local/regional conservation initiatives and strategies for Coho Salmon recovery and potential inclusion in NCSP. Promote water saving efforts and restoration projects that enhance flow during critical salmonid life stages.

Four focus areas were selected to implement NCSP efforts: Lagunitas Creek, Russian River tributaries, Mendocino Coast streams, and the lower Eel and South Fork Eel rivers. Evaluation and analysis of CDFW programs involved in Coho Salmon recovery is concentrated on these areas. The NCSP is also working towards developing a unique set of priority recommendations for each of the focus areas that will contribute to more effective, targeted restoration efforts to benefit Coho Salmon recovery.

Recently, the NCSP began working in conjunction with the new Cutting the Green Tape (CGT) initiative, which was introduced by the California Natural Resources Agency in late 2019 and supported by a one-time allotment of funding in July 2020. The CGT was developed to accelerate granting and permitting of restoration projects within the four focus areas identified by the NCSP to help enhance salmon recovery. NCSP staff is now coordinating with CGT strike teams to work on increasing regulatory efficiency in the implementation of restoration projects.

This report is intended to provide an update on progress made by the NCSP through December 2020. The following sections provide a summary of completed tasks, tasks that are underway, and next steps for each of the four NCSP main objectives described above.

Project Objectives

Objective 1: Evaluate recovery actions from the State Coho Recovery Strategy and Priority Action Coho Team (PACT) report that have been completed to date and collaborate with regional watershed partners to identify priority actions to implement moving forward utilizing PACT recommendations and the Salmon Habitat Restoration Priorities (SHaRP) process.

Tasks identified to achieve objective

1. Analyze habitat restoration projects funded through FRGP that have focused on Coho Salmon recovery in the four focus areas to evaluate success of recovery efforts
2. Initiate SHaRP or SHaRP-inspired processes in the four focus areas to ultimately produce watershed plans with high-priority, high-resolution restoration actions
3. Host watershed meetings that highlight PACT and Recovery Strategy tasks and other recovery-oriented actions that need to be completed

Progress

The NCSP has completed a comprehensive review of restoration projects funded through FRGP that have focused on Coho Salmon. This review assessed the number and types of projects funded for Coho Salmon and provided detailed analysis in focus areas on how FRGP funding has aligned with CDFW recommendations. The

NCSP analyzed range-wide and watershed-specific trends in grant funding to make recommendations regarding how FRGP could align itself with the highest priorities for Coho Salmon, and meet FRGP's intended purpose of restoring habitat to recover listed salmonid populations. This document was recently submitted to CDFW Executive and Regional Managers from the Northern and Bay Delta Regions and the team plans to make this document public in the near future.

For the South Fork Eel River SHaRP process, seven high-priority sub-watersheds of the South Fork Eel River were selected through an objective, data-based transparent ranking system. All the relevant history, fisheries and watershed data, and local expertise were presented and discussed at a series of public meetings. This information was used to determine the types and locations of restoration projects that would provide the greatest benefit to salmonids of the South Fork Eel River. All that information has been documented and organized into a plan that is currently being reviewed by a CDFW and NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) communications team that will make the plan available for release to the public this winter.

SHaRP-inspired processes have been initiated in the other three focus areas and expanded into the Lower Eel River as well. A steering committee for Lagunitas Creek with CDFW and NOAA staff was established in July 2020 and the committee has compiled relevant data to explore the applicability of a SHaRP-inspired process in Lagunitas, as the watershed has several successful prioritization efforts to date, including PACT. A steering committee for the Mendocino Coast was established in March 2020. This group with the help of regional experts has gathered relevant data and used a ranking process, similar to that of the South Fork Eel, to prioritize 17 HUC12 sub-watersheds (of the 48 on the Mendocino coast) to proceed with SHaRP. A steering team comprised of key NOAA and CDFW staff began meeting in spring 2020 to initiate a SHaRP-inspired process within four selected sub-watersheds in the lower Russian River basin. This team is compiling and reviewing data presented by California Sea Grant, along with several watershed reports and PACT, and will discuss findings with regional experts in upcoming meetings.

The Lower Eel River SHaRP-inspired process has formed three working groups composed of agency staff including representatives from CDFW and NOAA Fisheries that are focusing on three discrete areas of the lower Eel River: the mainstem, the estuary, and tributaries of both the mainstem and estuary. These groups have been meeting since July 2020 and have assembled the bulk of the data available for the focus areas, compiled a list of agency and public participants, and conducted initial public outreach to inform potential participants about the process and solicit additional data. The groups are now assessing the utility of the available data for restoration planning and strategizing on the approach for each of the three areas.

Next Steps

NCSP staff are taking next steps in their respective focus areas to develop high-resolution restoration priorities and communicate those results to restoration partners and CDFW staff involved in grant programs. Through SHaRP, CDFW and NOAA staff will review data with expert panels and schedule public meetings for several watersheds ranked as having the greatest potential for immediate restoration work. Meetings with NCSP and CGT staff are also scheduled for early 2021 to discuss how to incorporate recommendations from the NCSP work and existing priorities from the Recovery Strategy and PACT into CDFW's grant programs to ensure that grant-funded restoration is targeted at the greatest needs. These next steps will operate simultaneously and in parallel, where existing recommendations are being integrated into how CDFW supports restoration immediately, with simultaneous further refinement of priorities in areas that will benefit from higher-resolution priorities that can be implemented going forward.

Objective 2: Evaluate current habitat, population, and effectiveness monitoring efforts and utilize these efforts to guide recovery actions.

Tasks identified to achieve objectives

1. We will review and document the available population and habitat monitoring data and provide summaries of the strengths, weaknesses, data uses, and applications to management.
2. Provide recommendations on improvements to population and habitat monitoring including suggestions to enhance the utility of monitoring data, expand the scope of inference and accuracy of monitoring data, and standardize data collection and data reporting.

Progress

We have developed an outline for the final report which has been reviewed and approved by our project supervisors. Content for this outline is being developed in close coordination with CDFW staff responsible for managing California Monitoring Program (CMP) data and implementation.

The CMP science team and Coho Coordinators are currently reviewing material and creating products directly related to this objective. A workshop is being developed that is intended to provide a multi-agency and NGO forum to present and discuss much of this material. An NCSP staff member regularly attends the CMP science team meetings and is actively engaged in reviewing the available monitoring data and developing content for the CMP workshop that will be hosted by NOAA in the spring of 2021. The final report on Coho Salmon population and habitat monitoring efforts will be completed in coordination with CDFW staff already engaged in these topics to be consistent with interpretations and recommendations across the Department as well as those resulting from the forthcoming workshop.

To test various CMP design and implementation alternatives, Chris Loomis and other CDFW staff members in the CMP science team are using statistical model predictions to run sampling simulations. A predictive model of Coho Salmon redd distribution across the north coast was developed using all the available CMP data. Predicted redd densities are being used to evaluate and compare the effectiveness of various sampling designs in both areas that are currently monitored as well as in survey frames that have been developed but are not sampled due to budget and staff limitations. The results of this simulation exercise will be presented at the CMP workshop and used to facilitate a discussion of how to improve implementation of the CMP.

Information gathered and presented by the CMP science team as well as discussion points and recommendations derived from the monitoring workshop will be included in our final report.

Next Steps

The NCSP will continue to collaborate with the CMP science team to develop monitoring project summaries, CMP implementation simulations, and facilitate the 2021 joint NOAA and CDFW CMP monitoring workshop. As products are completed, we will be incorporating that content into the body of the final report.

Objective 3: Evaluate CDFW programs that affect the implementation of restoration actions and progress towards Coho recovery and develop recommendations on how to increase internal and external efficiencies and collaboration within and between these programs.

Tasks identified to achieve objectives

1. We will distribute a permitting and granting survey for stakeholders and restoration practitioners
2. We will host (jointly, with CDFW permitting staff) a public workshop to discuss and prioritize actions for improving the CDFW permitting process
3. Provide an analysis report of CDFW permitting processes
4. Identify potential collaborative efforts between and among state agencies that could benefit Coho Salmon recovery

Progress

NCSP staff created and administered a survey of restoration stakeholders in August 2020. The survey focused on CDFW granting and permitting processes and sought specific feedback regarding aspects of these processes that limit stakeholders' ability to perform restoration. The survey also posed a suite of options that CDFW could focus on as potential solutions to these issues. Almost 50 respondents from across the NCSP focus areas completed this survey. The data collected have been summarized and analyzed in the context of other permitting recommendations from

the Restoration Leaders Committee (RLC) and PACT. Currently these draft findings are being shared with staff working on the CGT initiative.

The NCSP team has begun meeting with CDFW permitting staff involved in CGT to develop recommendations for improving permitting pathways. The results from the survey are the focus for the recommendations brought forward to the CGT permitting team. The two groups will continue to meet regularly as they work towards a final set of recommendations and a public workshop.

The final analysis report for the stakeholder survey is in draft form and some comments have already been received from the permitting department. Recommendations in the document will be informed by the ongoing meetings between the CGT permitting team and the NCSP as both groups work through the plans for a public meeting.

Next Steps

The results from the survey, which have been reviewed by other groups within CDFW, will now be combined with PACT permitting recommendations and recommendations from the RLC. The next steps of the survey process are for NCSP staff to coordinate with CGT permitting staff on developing materials for a public workshop on CDFW permitting and granting. This workshop will be open to the public and will be focused on the four focus areas. In this workshop CDFW staff will discuss the results of our survey, actions that CDFW intends to take to address roadblocks in permitting, ideas for improved communication and collaboration, and the potential for a multi-project permit.

Through partnerships with the CGT permitting team and others the NCSP will highlight potential collaborative efforts to be pursued which could benefit Coho Salmon recovery.

Objective 4: Evaluate local/regional conservation initiatives and strategies for Coho Salmon recovery and potential inclusion in NCSP. Promote water saving efforts and restoration projects that enhance flow during critical salmonid life stages.

Tasks identified to achieve objectives

1. Evaluate Regional Conservation Investment Strategies (RCIS), Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP) and other programs, and potentially develop new watershed-specific initiatives.
2. Evaluate forbearance and other water conservation measures for improving instream flow.

Progress

The NCSP recently met with CDFW's Landscape Conservation and Planning Program (LCPP) along with additional Habitat Conservation and Planning Branch (HCPB) staff to present and discuss our respective programs. The NCSP learned about programs within the LCPP that could potentially contribute to Coho Salmon recovery on the north coast. These programs include RCIS, NCCP, Advance Mitigation Crediting, Conservation and Mitigation Banking, and Mitigation Credit Agreements (MCA).

A report outline that highlights the importance of water conservation to enhance streamflow for the protection of the freshwater phases of salmonids was sent to management for approval. This report will explain California water rights, types of forbearance and storage projects, permitting, and water security benefits. It will also highlight the need for these projects within the CCC ESU, especially the Russian River watershed. Discussions have been ongoing with CDFW's water rights coordinator, Trout Unlimited, the Gold Ridge RCD and the Cannabis, Flow, and Salmon inter-agency group held by the Regional Water Board. Several recent publications are available from partners that contain valuable information for water conservation project planning and development.

Next Steps

A follow-up meeting will be planned with LCPP to further learn and discuss program goals and possible collaboration. There is one pilot MCA in Yolo County that may contain salmonid species. NCSP will plan a meeting with the MCA team to discuss the pilot components, monitoring plans, and credit release plans. If a future RCIS is proposed along the north coast, Coho Salmon habitat enhancement or upland improvements may help with recovery of the species through an advance mitigation plan. This will be part of a greater evaluation of RCIS and NCCP concepts.

The future of Coho Salmon habitat within rural, unregulated streams is dependent on innovative water conservation measures. The NCSP can recommend or review projects within the focus watersheds through our SHaRP or SHaRP-inspired processes influenced by local knowledge as well as PACT, state and federal plans, and more recent watershed-wide evaluations. These activities will be part of coordination highlighted in the upcoming summary report.