

Columbia Basin Collaborative Structured Decision Making Sub-group Steelhead Pilot Project

Meeting Summary

February 14, 2025, 9:00-11:00 am PT / 10:00 am-12:00 pm MT
Virtual via Zoom

Attendees

Sub-group Members in Attendance: Adrienne Averett (Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife), Alex Conley (Yakima Basin Fish & Wildlife Recovery Board), Art Martin (Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife), B.J. Kieffer (Spokane Tribe of Indians), Brand Haslick (Burns Paiute Tribe), Brent Hall (Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs), Cynthia Studebaker (Army Corps of Engineers), Dennis Daw (Upper Snake River Tribes Foundation), Eric Crawford (Trout Unlimited), Gary Marston (Trout Unlimited), Grant Waltz (Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife), Jeremiah Bonifer (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation), Kevin Scribner (SalmonSafe), Navi Chanda Gast (SalmonSafe intern), Rene Henery (Trout Unlimited), Scott Hoefer (Bureau of Reclamation), Steve Martin (Snake River Recovery Board), Toby Harbison (Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife), Tom Iverson (Yakama Nation Fisheries), and Urban Eberhart (Kittitas Reclamation District).

Facilitation Team: Sam Meysohn (Kearns & West), Sarah Davidson (Kearns & West)

Welcome, Agenda Review, and Updates

Sam Meysohn, Kearns & West, welcomed members to the Structured Decision Making (SDM) Steelhead Pilot Project meeting as part of the Columbia Basin Collaborative (CBC). Sam welcomed sub-group members, reviewed meeting guidelines, and provided an overview of the agenda. The meeting topics included: 1) Welcome, Agenda Review and Updates, 2) Bottlenecks for Major Population Groups (MPGs), 3) Conceptual Model Updates, 4) Confirm Next Steps, and 5) Confirm Action Items and Summary.

Sam began the meeting by reviewing key takeaways from the Ad Hoc I/RG meeting that occurred on February 10, 2025. Key takeaways included:

- There is uncertainty about future funding due to shifting Federal direction. Current funding will last through the end of March 2025.
- The group decided to scale down activity until future funding is identified. This may stretch current funding beyond March 2025.
- Regarding SDM, the progress of the sub-group will be documented so that work can be resumed in the future. Also, the group needs to determine what, if any SDM-related activities can continue without close coordination with the CBC SDM Steelhead Pilot Project.

The group had the following questions and comments:

- Members added that they are keeping tabs on the status of the funding and will update the group when they can. One member noted that the funding freeze is not related to the merit of the CBC but reflects federal changes.

Bottlenecks for MPGs

At the December meeting, the group identified that it would be beneficial to understand the bottlenecks impacting each of the MPGs to aid in the work group's development of a conceptual model. Sam invited Alex Conley, Yakima Basin Fish & Wildlife Recovery Board, to present on the bottlenecks impacting the Yakima River MPG, and Steve Martin, Snake River Recovery Board, and Jeremiah Bonifer, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, to present on the bottlenecks impacting the Umatilla / Walla Walla River MPG. Sam noted that bottlenecks impacting the John Day River / Cascade Eastern Slope will be presented at a later date.

Yakima River MPG

Alex presented on recovery bottlenecks for the steelhead MPG in the Yakima River. He noted that the Yakima Basin covers about one quarter of the mid-Columbia distinct population segment (DPS), and that work has stemmed from recovery framework plans established in the early 2000s. He explained that in implementing the plans, some threats had been successfully reduced—access, habitat, fish screening, flow, fisheries regulation, hatchery strays, forest management—but a 2022 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) viability report still placed the population(s) in high-risk categories. The 2022 NOAA Middle Columbia River Steelhead 5-Year Review uses dates through 2018, so did not include the dramatic population drop offs in recent years. Alex also reviewed the status of occupancy, noting that many spatial structure targets have been met but that there is more work to be done, primarily for the upper Yakima population. He summarized that the key bottlenecks to address include the need to increase abundance and productivity through improvement of smolt and adult survival, complete passage work in the Upper Yakima and improve key diversity metrics.

The group had the following questions and comments:

- One member asked about differentiating between ocean conditions impacting the return of adults versus predation in the Columbia impacting juveniles on their way out into the ocean. Alex noted that it can be done, but would require expertise, and explained that poor ocean condition years have synced with poor out-migration years, making distinction between the two challenging.
- Multiple group members noted that a better understanding of ocean conditions is key but is beyond the scope of this group. Another group member added that climate change, in addition to ocean productivity, is beyond the management scope of the group, making it hard to address from a recovery perspective.
- A member noted that diversity metrics can be addressed, as there is data that shows that there are major bottlenecks early in the ocean journey of the fish, so giving fish an advantage relating to diversity could be helpful. Group members agreed that although some factors are outside of their scope, and there are management decisions that can support steelhead to have the best chance at survival based on factors in their control.

Umatilla / Walla Walla River MPG

Steve and Jeremiah then presented on the bottlenecks inhibiting the Umatilla / Walla Walla River MPG from reaching viability. Steve shared that the bottlenecks facing the Umatilla / Walla Walla MPG have been longstanding issues. He reiterated that while there may be factors, such as ocean conditions, that the group cannot manage, steelhead benefit from sending the most numerous and healthy fish into the ocean as possible. Steve gave context for the Umatilla / Walla Walla MPG and Jeremiah highlighted that this is an extremely modified system, noting the embankment of Mill Creek – the levee system of Mill Creek and the Bennington Lake reservoir—as examples of the modifications.

Steve reviewed a variety of factors that are acting as bottlenecks, which include low flow, warm temperatures, degraded habitat, lack of floodplain access, difficult fish passage, low conversion from adults ascending Bonneville as adults in the summer to adults on spawning grounds, overshoot, and fallback challenges. Steve highlighted that ubiquitous threats include degraded and inaccessible habitat, land use issues, and predation. Noting that much of the ecosystem has been modified to benefit predators at the cost of salmon and steelhead, he recommended increasing stream flow, improving fish passage, enhancing cold water refugia, facilitating adult fallback, and controlling predation/modifying habitat utilized by predators as methods for addressing bottlenecks. Jeremiah highlighted that addressing McKay Dam is a priority, as well as habitat work in the lower basin. A recent study on the impact of bryophytes was also highlighted.

The group had no questions or comments. Sam thanked Steve and Jeremiah for their presentation.

Conceptual Model Updates

Sam invited Rene Henery, Trout Unlimited, Kevin Scriber, Salmon-Safe, Steve Martin, and Alex Conley to share updates on the conceptual model process.

Conceptual Model Approach

Rene began by explaining the layered approach of the conceptual model, noting the importance of geography, life-stage/life histories, fish experience, and factors directly affecting them. Rene also explained the aspects of the SDM process, including bringing together a group of people to create a common understanding of the world and a common suite of objectives to drive action towards achieving those objectives.

Draft Conceptual Model

Alex then shared his initial draft of a framework conceptual model for the mid-Columbia, which he broke down by life history usage, geographic area, concerns, potential actions, and priority levels. He noted that the potential actions included factors that can be addressed through management.

The group had the following questions and comments:

- One group member asked a clarifying question about how tribal fisheries fit into Alex's model.
- Several group members identified factors they felt were missing, including kelt reconditioning programs, downstream passage, and Social, Cultural, Economic, and Ecological (SCEE) values.
- The next step would be to look at Alex's slides and document levels of certainty and confidence around the different assumptions and causal relationships, noting where impacts could be made and how much existing information could be leveraged.
- Alex noted that continuing to develop the model would be a huge effort and is worth doing but only if the appropriate level of capacity can be supported.

Predation Conceptual Model

Sam then shared updates from a recent discussion on the predation-specific conceptual model, noting a proposal to focus first on one MPG, then expand to all MPGs in the Mid-Columbia DPS. Jeremiah noted that he had initiated this recommendation due to the complexities of predation, the need to scale down to better use limited time and resources, and the ability to later scale the model back up to other MPGs.

The group had the following questions and comments:

- The group agreed it would be a big lift to examine the whole DPS and that identifying commonalities between MPGs would lead to efficiency down the road.

- Group members expressed concern about focusing on one factor such as predation and wanted to be sure that linkages between impacts would not be overlooked, which the group agreed on.
- Members agreed that more discussion will be needed for identifying the criteria to select the pilot MPG, but that they should focus on an MPG with high levels of existing information and where the group can be impactful.
- The group also agreed that it would be prudent to focus on one MPG at a time for the general conceptual model, rather than the entire mid-Columbia DPS.

Confirm Next Steps

Sam summarized that the next steps include developing objective criteria for selecting a pilot MPG as a starting point for the conceptual models, selecting the MPG, documenting the level of certainty and confidence in existing information, and integrating SCEE values. While the group may be coming to a pause, the work group can document the work done so far and decisions made to date. The work group can continue off-line to determine what, if any, activities can continue without work group coordination in the meantime.

Confirm Action Items and Summary

Sam thanked the work group and confirmed the following action items:

Action Items:

- **KW:** Coordinate with Kevin and Gary to document SDM Steelhead Pilot Project Work Group progress.
- **KW:** Share survey to identify what activities can continue without regular coordination with the whole SDM Steelhead Pilot Project Work Group.
- **All:** Please complete this survey to share your feedback on the meeting and your response to the prompt above by **Friday, March 7**.
- **KW:** Draft a meeting summary and circulate to the work group for review by **Friday, March 7**.

The meeting adjourned at 11:00 am PT.