

Wild steelhead or hatchery fish in Lake Creek?

Public meeting will discuss changes to fish management in Siuslaw River tributaries

By Rob Lafferty
For the Review

Everyone with an interest in river fishing or the health of aquatic life in the Siuslaw River watershed and its tributary streams is invited to a public meeting on Sunday, Feb. 10 at the Mapleton Lions Club. The meeting, scheduled from 4-6pm at 88148 Riverview Ave in Mapleton, will feature information and a PowerPoint presentation by state Fish & Wildlife Dept. representatives.

Bob Buckman, the Mid-Coast District fish biologist for ODFW, will be joined by assistant district fish biologist John Spangler to explain the department's proposal to stop planting 15,000 steelhead in the Deadwood creek area while opening the Lake Creek fishery to allow anglers to harvest one steelhead per day and three per season.

A core group of about 20 local residents have formed a group they call FoLCS (Friends of Lake Creek Steelhead) and have held two informal meetings already. During their second meeting, FoLCS compiled a list of 26 detailed questions to present to ODFW staff at the public meeting, based on comments heard around the community as well as their personal experience with fishery programs that have been conducted in Lake Creek, Deadwood Creek, Indian Creek, Greenleaf Creek, Whittaker Creek and other tributaries of the Siuslaw River.

Deadwood area resident Derek Pennel has agreed to serve as moderator during the meeting. Pennel, who also chairs of the Blachly School District Board, has a long family history of fishing in Lake Creek. His history is mirrored by dozens of other extended families that have lived in the valley over four or five generations.

"They've been planting steelhead and other fish species around here since before my Dad was growing up almost 75 years ago," Pennel said. "It appears now that the steelhead hatchery program is being totally discontinued.

"I'm happy that the ODFW people are coming out here to share their science and answer the common questions that folks around here have been asking. We're hoping for a big turnout at this town hall meeting."

One of the questions that will be asked is: after millions – or possibly hundreds of millions – of steelhead smolt releases over the last half-century, do any genetically pure, wild Lake Creek steelhead even exist now?

According to past statements by ODFW, Lake Creek and its major tributaries has been a productive catch-and-release fishery for wild steelhead along with the 15,000 hatchery winter steelhead released into Greenleaf Creek. The Siuslaw River also has resident cutthroat trout and seasonal salmon runs for fisherman to pursue.

In October of 2012, ODFW held a meeting in Newport of its Coastal Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan Mid-Coast Stratum Stakeholder Team. At that meeting, ODFW staff indicated that they are looking into release strategies that could spread out angler pressure on the Siuslaw River. A recommendation was made to phase out the Lake Creek steelhead planting program, increase the number of fish planted in the Siuslaw River from 85,000 to 100,000, and increase the number of release points in the lower river.

The Salmon Trout Enhancement Program is a volunteer program within ODFW that works to restore and enhance native salmon and trout populations. According to a department summary of the October meeting, the Florence STEP group does not support the proposed shift in releases from Lake Creek to the Siuslaw River; they would prefer a larger number released without the reduction. The STEP group doesn't see how the area could support a wild native steelhead fishery.

There was also discussion over closing the Siletz, Alsea and Siuslaw rivers to retention of wild Coho salmon and keeping the fishery only in the bays. That proposal was seen as discriminating against anglers that don't fish the bay, and could create a greater impact to the early portion of the Coho run.

The management team recommended keeping the current retention designations and supported a proposal to change the designation of Lake Creek to retention in order to establish new wild winter steelhead fisheries.

According to FoLCS, the number of Coho returns in the basin seems to be healthier than they've been in the last 20-30 years. They question how a small hatchery steelhead release program in the upper tributaries could have any negative impact on the native Coho population.

For more information about FoLCS or the Feb. 10 meeting, call Les Benscoter at 541-964-3666 or check online at [HYPERLINK](http://www.deadwoodtradingpost.com/Deadwood-Message-Board.html)

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