

The Issaquah Press – July 7, 2009

County Council urges protection for Lake Samm kokanee

By Warren Kagarise

Conservationists seeking to protect threatened Lake Sammamish kokanee salmon received a boost last week from King County leaders. King County Council members called on federal officials June 29 to list kokanee salmon under the Endangered Species Act. Issaquah officials and local and state environmental groups had previously urged the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the salmon species.

The motion passed by the County Council also recommends for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife to follow through with a proposal to implement emergency conservation efforts to help the kokanee.

Officials estimate that fewer than 100 Lake Sammamish kokanee remain. Attempts to introduce other varieties of kokanee into the lake have been unsuccessful.

“If these kokanee in Lake Sammamish go away, there will be no kokanee in Lake Sammamish,” said Mark Taylor, Washington Council president of Trout Unlimited and president of the organization’s Bellevue/Issaquah chapter.

Taylor said he expects a decision regarding the kokanee from federal officials as early as next year.

Taylor credited county officials for encouraging federal officials to protect the salmon. He noted how the effort to protect the kokanee had attracted support from several quarters.

Trout Unlimited state leaders recognized Issaquah as Conservationist of the Year for 2008 after city officials signed the kokanee petition. Snoqualmie tribal officials and environmentalists also signed the petition.

Lake Sammamish kokanee are similar to sockeye salmon, but kokanee are smaller and live in landlocked bodies of water. The species lives in Lake Sammamish and spawns in nearby streams.

Taylor said 20 million to 40 million non-native kokanee had been introduced to Lake Sammamish since the 1980s — but the introduced fish did not survive. Taylor said scientists are unsure why, though speculation ranges from specific water conditions to a virus present in the lake to which Lake Sammamish kokanee are immune.

“Only natives will live in the lake as far as we know,” Taylor said.

Friends of the Issaquah Hatchery Executive Director Gestin Suttle said it was important for county leaders to add their voices to the issue.

“I think the council’s position will help build a chorus in favor of action for this vulnerable species,” Suttle wrote in an e-mail.

Lake Sammamish kokanee were once a staple for the Snoqualmie Tribe. Kokanee once numbered in the thousands and the species supported a subsistence fishery for the Snoqualmie.

County officials noted the importance of the kokanee to the lake ecosystem.

“With the kokanee population hovering at the brink of extinction, this is a matter for urgent and immediate action,” Councilman Larry Phillips said in a news release. “The kokanee play a historic role in the Lake Sammamish ecosystem, and we must protect the small number that remain and take actions that will allow the species to survive.”

Officials attribute the decline of kokanee in the lake to habitat loss. The study recommends a hatchery program be implemented as soon as possible in order to protect the remaining fish.

“Proper protection of the Lake Sammamish kokanee salmon needs to begin immediately,” Council Vice Chairwoman Jane Hague said in the release. “It is critical that the federal and state governments recognize their importance to our region and act now to prevent their extinction.”

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The Seattle Times – June 30, 2009

Council appeals for kokanee rescue

Seattle

The Obama administration should commit to restoring kokanee to the Lake Sammamish watershed, the Metropolitan King County Council said Monday.

After their numbers had fallen from several thousand to less than 200, King County and several other groups asked the Bush administration in 2007 to protect the red-streaked landlocked salmon under the Endangered Species Act. They never got an answer.

Earlier this year, biologists determined that fewer than 100 spawning fish remain and that without immediate help from a hatchery program, the once-abundant fish could disappear altogether.

Monday, the council voted unanimously to ask the new administration — and the state — to take emergency action to save the fish.

King County and several community groups tried for years to get federal protection for a related strain of kokanee that spawn in Issaquah Creek, but first the Clinton and then the Bush administrations complained they were stymied by a backlog of creatures under review for possible listing as endangered species. By the time the Bush White House rejected the request, not a single kokanee had been seen in seven years.