



NEWS RELEASE

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State's first release of hatchery sturgeon in Lake Roosevelt is May 12

SPOKANE - About 2,000 10- to 12-inch-long white sturgeon will be released in Lake Roosevelt May 12, marking Washington's first effort to recover declining populations of the largest and oldest freshwater fish in the upper Columbia River.

The historic effort is a collaboration of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the Spokane Tribe of Indians (STOI), and the Colville Confederated Tribes (CCT).

WDFW Columbia Basin Fish Hatchery staff from Moses Lake, who have been rearing the fish since they arrived from Canada in February, will truck the young sturgeon to Stevens County. At Kettle Falls some will be transferred to a barge for transport to deepwater release sites in the Marcus Flat area of the Columbia River reservoir. Others will go to the North Gorge and Northport areas of the reservoir by boat.

On the same day, fish biologists in British Columbia will release 4,500 young sturgeon in the Beaver Creek/Waneta sections of the reservoir north of the U.S.-Canadian border. Another 4,500 will go into the system near Castlegar, B.C., May 13-14, and 800 more later in the spring, bringing Canadian releases to nearly 30,000 juvenile sturgeon over the last two years.

The releases are part of ongoing cooperative efforts of the Upper Columbia White Sturgeon Recovery Initiative (UCWSRI), including U.S. and Canadian government agencies, tribes, industry, organizations and others. The goal of the initiative is to ensure the long-term viability of naturally reproducing sturgeon populations in the upper Columbia River.

In the years ahead, both countries will release up to 12,000 juvenile sturgeon annually in the U.S. and Canadian portions of the Columbia River.

STOI received Bonneville Power Administration fish and wildlife mitigation funds to coordinate U.S. efforts with WDFW, CCT and others.

"Hatchery rearing and releasing intervention is necessary to preserve the diversity of the remaining sturgeon population," said WDFW fish biologist Jason McLellan, who is coordinating the release.

Biologists estimate the current adult sturgeon population in the U.S. and Canadian portions of the upper Columbia River system at approximately 3,000 to 4,000 fish, McLellan said. Although no historical numbers exist for comparative purposes, biologists know the species is declining because surveys in recent years have found few sturgeon under 20 years of age.

White sturgeon (*Acipenser transmontanus*) can live for more than a century and grow up to 19 feet and 1,800 pounds. With a torpedo-shaped body, large dorsal fin, flat head, bony plates, and whisker-like sensors, the white sturgeon has remained virtually unchanged for 175 million years.

The reasons behind this ancient species' decline - whether the result of poor reproductive success or low survival rates for young fish - are not fully understood, McLellan said.

Possible causes for the decline may include construction of hydroelectric dams, changes in Columbia River flow patterns, pollution by municipal and industrial water users and predation by other fish, McLellan said.

The upper Columbia River watershed above Chief Joseph Dam, including Lake Roosevelt, is closed to all sturgeon fishing to protect current populations.

The sturgeon set for release May 12 came to Washington in mid-February as three to four-inch fish from the Kootenay Sturgeon Conservation Hatchery near Cranbrook, B.C.

In April, each young fish was implanted with a small passive integrated transponder tag, which provides information on the background of individual fish for monitoring purposes. Each fish also had a unique number of "scutes" (bony plates on the side) removed to provide an external identification mark.

Plans currently call for continuing the sturgeon-rearing program at WDFW's Columbia Basin Fish Hatchery until a feasibility study can be completed to determine the best options for a complete U.S. sturgeon hatchery operation.

"The hatchery sturgeon release will act as a 'stop gap' measure to ensure juvenile recruitment into the population while the recovery team works on other measures to increase natural reproduction," said CCT's Fish and Wildlife Department Director Joe Peone. "It would be a tragic loss for the Colville people and all citizens of this part of the Columbia River Basin to lose such a resource. Extinction is not an option."

STOI Department of Natural Resources Director Rudy Peone agreed. "White sturgeon in the upper Columbia River have been a part of the river ecosystem for thousands of years," he said. "These fish are an important fixture in regional Native American culture and have also become popular with sport fishers. Collectively, we need to work to bring this ancient species back from the brink of extinction and to retain this piece of our heritage."

Information on the white sturgeon recovery initiative, on-going sturgeon monitoring work and suggestions on what Washington community groups and individuals can do to help can be found at: <http://www.uppercolumbiasturgeon.org/>.