



Want more and better fishing?

We sure do. But to get there, we need a new approach to steelhead management.

Why? Because a lot has changed. Prior to the mid-1990s, there were no steelhead populations protected under the Endangered Species Act. Today, [more than 70 percent](#) of wild steelhead populations fall under that protection.

This protection constrains fisheries and provides new opportunities to challenge management decisions in court, creating uncertainty for anglers, managers and the economies that rely on robust angling opportunity

In recent years our scientific understanding of the [impacts](#) of hatcheries on [wild populations](#) and our knowledge of what [wild fish need](#) to thrive has come a long way. But our steelhead management has not kept pace, and that directly impacts our fishing opportunity.

To be fair, these are difficult times to manage steelhead sport fisheries. Our state and federal steelhead managers have a tough task in conserving wild steelhead, as required by law, while also providing fishing opportunity for sport anglers. It is a tough job. But we at TU and Wild Steelheaders United believe it can be done.

Here's how:

The Portfolio Approach

We believe management should match the reality of conditions on the ground.

That means if a river has an ample supply of good habitat and a relatively strong wild steelhead population, it should be managed exclusively for wild steelhead. If a river has a lot of good habitat but the wild population needs a boost, a conservation hatchery may make sense.

Case Study: The Puget Sound

Skagit	Skykomish	Stillaguamish
<p>The Skagit River system would manage for wild steelhead only. It has by far the largest wild steelhead population of all Puget Sound rivers, roughly 9,000 annually. It has relatively high quality habitat that can support a fishable (catch-and-release) wild steelhead population and tribal harvest consistent with the tribes' treaty rights (50 percent of the "harvestable surplus"). And it is a critical population for recovering wild steelhead in greater Puget Sound, which are protected under the Endangered Species Act.</p>	<p>The Skykomish River has substantial wild steelhead production potential. We support continuing the current winter steelhead hatchery program with a solid monitoring program. If success is defined as the number of hatchery fish caught in fisheries, this is the most successful (and most cost-effective) winter steelhead hatchery of its type in Puget Sound (i.e., segregated hatchery designed to provide harvest opportunity). The Skykomish hatchery should also be operated consistent with standards established by the Hatchery Scientific Review Group to minimize harm to wild steelhead.</p>	<p>In the Stillaguamish River, we suggest experimenting with a different type of hatchery program, one that uses local broodstock to try to rebuild the river's depleted wild steelhead population. This would enable us to evaluate whether such a hatchery program could be effective for this conservation purpose. To date, there is thin evidence that this is the case, but it could be tried on an experimental basis.</p>

It also means that if a river has highly degraded habitat with little potential for wild steelhead recovery, a hatchery to provide fishing opportunity may be appropriate. This is where we differ from others: We have reached a point where this can no longer be an all or nothing game.

In short, we propose using common sense coupled with solid science to direct steelhead management -- a diverse "portfolio" of steelhead rivers that is consistent with the legal and moral imperative to recover wild steelhead while providing fishing opportunity.

Learning by doing

This portfolio approach also makes sense because it provides a much-needed scientific experiment that will help us manage steelhead better in the future. For years questions have swirled about the causes of wild steelhead decline, the effectiveness of hatcheries, what wild steelhead need to recover and how to wisely invest taxpayer money. By managing steelhead based on conditions on the ground, using different tactics in differing watersheds, we can answer these questions and adjust steelhead management appropriately.

The benefits

Trout Unlimited's Wild Steelhead Initiative team has decades of experience working to improve steelhead management and fishing for steelhead. We've seen the good, the bad and the ugly, and in living through those experiences, we've come to believe in this portfolio approach.

First, it is consistent with our legal and moral obligation to recover wild steelhead. Recovery of wild steelhead is not possible without conserving our strongest remaining wild populations. By protecting those populations and judiciously using conservation hatcheries to jump-start struggling wild populations, we can lay a solid foundation for recovery.

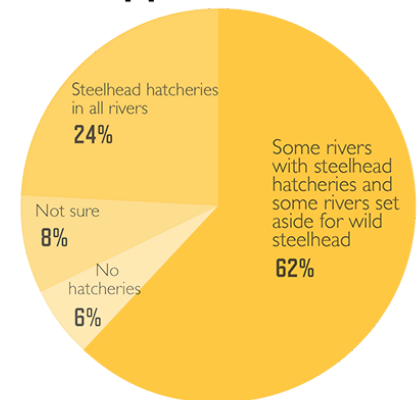
Second, it provides diverse fishing opportunities, which is what steelhead anglers want. We know from extensive polling that steelhead anglers want a variety of fishing opportunities. Many want to catch-and-release wild steelhead, others want to harvest hatchery steelhead. The portfolio approach offers both.

Third, by aligning conservation and fishing opportunity it reduces the risk of fishery closures and economic hardship.

Whether we like it or not, the ESA is here and requires that fisheries be shut down that imperil wild steelhead. By allowing only well-regulated catch-and-release fisheries on our strongest wild steelhead rivers and hatchery-based harvest fisheries in rivers where they are least likely to hurt wild steelhead, we provide fishing opportunity while minimizing the risk of fishery closures. Anglers on the water means business in river communities.

Last but not least, this approach will teach us how to better manage steelhead to meet both fishing and conservation goals. As anglers, we all want steelhead management that

Preferred management approaches



sustains the fish and keeps us on the water. Using different management techniques in different rivers, we will learn what works and what doesn't. That is good not only for wild steelhead recovery and the quality of our fishing, but it will also help make sure our tax and license dollars are well spent.



Putting the portfolio approach in play on the ground requires a significant shift in management, and change is never easy. It will come about only if anglers and fishing businesses unite in asking for it. Become part of this movement by signing the Wild Steelheaders United credo at www.wildsteelheaders.org/take-the-pledge/. Join our growing community of steelhead anglers who understand that together we have the power to shape the future of wild steelhead and steelhead fishing.