



WILD STEELHEAD INITIATIVE: ANSWERS TO FAQs

In discussions with steelhead anglers, conservationists and concerned citizens we have fielded a number of thoughtful questions about a TU-led, range-wide wild steelhead conservation effort. This document is intended to present and answer those questions to make the case for such an effort and TU's leadership role.

QUESTION: WHAT IS THE WILD STEELHEAD INITIATIVE?

Answer: The Wild Steelhead Initiative is an intensive effort to restore wild steelhead throughout their historic range and to save the legacy of fishing for them. Today, nearly three quarters of all distinct populations of wild steelhead are so diminished that they are listed under the Endangered Species Act. As wild steelhead runs have declined and disappeared, so have opportunities to fish for them. For too long steelhead anglers have waited for government or Providence to reverse the decline of wild steelhead. If we want to be able to fish for wild steelhead into the future, we must act now, in unison, before it's too late.

QUESTION: BY FOCUSING ON WILD STEELHEAD, COULD THE INITIATIVE REDUCE ANGLING OPPORTUNITY?

Answer: We believe that steelhead angling opportunity — defined both in terms of time on the water and the quality of the experience — will be much greater if rivers with potential to support substantial wild (i.e., naturally spawning, locally adapted) steelhead populations are protected, reconnected and restored, and fish management (hatcheries and fishing regulation) prioritizes the health of wild steelhead. This belief is based on the clear and growing scientific evidence that locally adapted, diverse wild steelhead with sufficient habitat are much more productive than hatchery fish, and that hatchery fish reduce the productivity of wild fish through genetic and ecological pathways. While there may be a need to reduce fishing opportunity in the short-term on some rivers to give wild populations an opportunity to rebuild, we believe that short-term sacrifice will be more than justified by the long-term increase in fishing opportunity.





QUESTION: WHY IS TU FOCUSING ITS ATTENTION AND RESOURCES ON WILD STEELHEAD NOW?

Answer: There are several reasons:

- Wild steelhead are revered — and deservedly so — as the premier sport fish on the West Coast, and many anglers (including TU members) care deeply about their conservation and the opportunity to fish for them.
- Major progress is being made to protect and improve steelhead habitat throughout their native range. TU wants to continue to expand and protect that habitat work, including the millions of dollars we have invested across the West. We also see a need to align all of the “Hs” — habitat (including hydro), hatcheries and harvest in order to take full advantage of the productive capacity of steelhead habitat.
- Our scientific understanding of what wild steelhead need to thrive has increased significantly in recent years. TU wants to make sure the latest and best science is being used to make informed decisions about steelhead management.
- While we have made progress in recent years in the science and conservation of wild steelhead, due to a variety of factors, including drought, climate change, fisheries management policy and water supply management, we must expand and intensify our efforts if we are to realize this vision.

QUESTION: IS TU OPPOSED TO STEELHEAD HATCHERIES?

Answer: No. TU supports the use of responsibly managed hatcheries in specific circumstances. For example, steelhead hatcheries may be appropriate to provide fishing and harvest opportunity on rivers where severe habitat degradation or decades of hatchery dependence make restoring fishable, wild populations impractical. TU is also open to innovative, experimental uses of hatcheries to facilitate recovery of wild populations, such as where a wild steelhead population has been lost or has been reduced to such low numbers that it cannot rebuild on its own. In all cases, TU believes that hatchery operations should be based on the best available science, and should not be operated to the detriment of wild steelhead in river systems that have a high likelihood of supporting abundant, fishable wild steelhead populations.





QUESTION: WHAT ARE SPECIFIC OUTCOMES THAT TU HOPES TO ACHIEVE WITH THE WILD STEELHEAD INITIATIVE?

Answer: Wild steelhead are incredibly tough and resilient, but the bottom line is they need certain basic conditions to thrive. They require a sufficient amount of high quality habitat for all life stages (egg to adult), access to that habitat and adequate streamflow. They also require certain population characteristics, including locally adapted genetics, life history diversity, and adequate distribution throughout a river system to buffer against catastrophic loss if one segment of the population is decimated by something like drought, landslide or wildfire.

The Initiative will focus on achieving these conditions in rivers with high wild steelhead potential. Identification of such rivers, conservation objectives and selection of specific actions (habitat and fishery management) necessary to achieve those conditions, will be a priority in the coming year.

QUESTION: WHAT WILL THIS TU-LED INITIATIVE ACCOMPLISH THAT IS NEW AND IMPACTFUL, AND WILL IT COMPETE WITH THE CONSERVATION WORK OF OTHER ORGANIZATIONS?

Answer: There are several organizations working to conserve wild steelhead in specific areas in California, Idaho, Oregon and Washington, and TU often works closely with those organizations. TU intends to build on the good wild steelhead conservation work done to date. However, TU brings unique attributes to wild steelhead conservation efforts. Those include:

- Organizational capacity to employ a multitude of strategies and tactics (including habitat restoration, and federal and state policy advocacy)
- Operations at all relevant scales (federal, state and local)
- An interdisciplinary professional staff that includes scientists, restoration practitioners, policy experts, grassroots organizers, lawyers, and communications experts who operate in all of the western steelhead states
- Staff and volunteers in many communities along steelhead rivers who work cooperatively with landowners, water right holders, tribes, and county, state and federal natural resource managers
- A growing membership of over 160,000 members nationwide.





The powerful combination of expert, experienced staff with passionate, dedicated volunteers has enabled TU to achieve major conservation victories across the U.S. TU has demonstrated that it has the capacity to affect change at a large scale, and can amplify the work of other groups dedicated to steelhead conservation to maximal effect. We welcome and encourage supporters of other organizations to join Wild Steelheaders United, the grassroots group TU is forming to execute the Initiative.

QUESTION: HOW WILL WILD STEELHEADERS UNITED BE ORGANIZED AND ACTIVATED?

Answer: Steelhead management is largely a state affair once they enter freshwater, except to the extent that they are listed under the Endangered Species Act, in which case NOAA has jurisdiction as well. Wild Steelheaders United will seek to influence decision-making regarding each of the Hs: habitat (including hydropower), harvest and hatcheries. To influence policy, wild steelhead advocates need to be able to consistently and effectively engage with the state fish and wildlife agencies and commissions and maintain that engagement over time. We also need to build relationships with state legislators on relevant committees who wield significant power over fish and wildlife agencies because of their ability to control funding and use legislation to achieve specific outcomes. The best way to be heard by legislators is to have engaged constituents.

Achieving significant habitat and steelhead management advances will be much less likely without active involvement by TU staff and committed grassroots leaders and steelhead anglers. As experience has shown, it is certainly possible to rally conservation-minded steelhead anglers to weigh in on a specific management decision that threatens to take away something they value, but there is no precedent for advancing a proactive, sustainable policy agenda at scale through purely volunteer efforts. Advancing such an agenda requires professional staff with organizing, policy advocacy, and communication skills.

TU has such staff members in every state in the range of wild steelhead, and these staff members can organize, educate and mobilize members of Wild Steelheaders United to achieve conservation goals. Where it makes strategic sense to do so, TU will welcome partnerships with other organizations pursuing the same goals.





QUESTION: WILL WILD STEELHEADERS UNITED HAVE ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS?

Answer: No. Wild Steelheaders United will consist entirely of individuals who subscribe to the values and objectives set forth in the credo of Wild Steelheaders United and want to be involved. It is a community that will be staffed and managed by TU to achieve the Initiative's conservation goals. By not having organizational members - which creates challenging and time-consuming governance issues - Wild Steelheaders United will be able to act quickly and decisively, while minimizing costs. Of course, individuals are free to join or leave Wild Steelheaders United as they desire.

QUESTION: WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE THAT TU'S WILD STEELHEAD INITIATIVE WILL BE SUCCESSFUL?

Answer: There are no guarantees that it will, but TU has played a leadership role in a number of country's most notable trout and salmon conservation achievements of the last decade that speak to the organization's potential. Those victories include:

- Removal of large dams on the Elwha, Penobscot, White Salmon, Sandy and Carmel rivers to reopen salmon and steelhead habitat
- Permanent protection of more than 10 million acres of high quality fish and wildlife habitat on public lands in Idaho and Colorado through protection of roadless areas
- Securing agreements that pave the way for removal of four large dams on the Klamath River, which will open up over 400 miles of salmon and steelhead habitat.

In addition, though the battle is not yet over, the fact that the EPA is considering unprecedented action to protect the rivers of what is arguably the world's greatest salmon system, Bristol Bay, Alaska, is a testament to TU's ability to effectively lead a large, multi-faceted campaign.





QUESTION: HOW WILL THIS INITIATIVE INTERSECT WITH THE INTERESTS OF INDIAN TRIBES WITH TREATY-BASED FISHING RIGHTS?

Answer: Several tribes have signed treaties with the federal government, which guarantee them 50 percent of the “harvestable surplus” of salmon and steelhead (harvestable surplus refers to the fish available for harvest after allowing enough fish to return to the spawning grounds). TU respects tribal treaty rights and wants to see them honored. “Treaty tribes” have a co-management relationship with the federal and state governments, and it is up to the tribes and the government agencies that manage fisheries to determine appropriate tribal harvest levels and seasons.

Though our motives may differ, TU and tribes share a common goal, the rebuilding of wild steelhead populations. In fact, TU has very productive partnerships with tribes that are focused on critical steelhead habitat needs, such as improving instream flow in water-short rivers, restoring and reconnecting floodplain habitat, and removing fish passage barriers. We will continue and hopefully expand that work under the Initiative. In addition, TU will seek to ensure that the best available science informs steelhead hatchery and fishery (both harvest and catch-and-release) management so enough wild steelhead to sustain abundant, diverse populations escape to spawning grounds.

QUESTION: WILL THE INITIATIVE TACKLE WILD STEELHEAD CONSERVATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA?

Answer: If there is an opportunity to have significant impact on wild steelhead conservation in B.C., we will seek to engage. TU is currently a United States-focused organization comprised of American members with all of its staff in the U.S. Consequently, our ability to create positive change in B.C. is limited because Canadian decision-makers are not responsive to the advocacy of our members. That said, we will explore the potential for partnerships with Canadian non-governmental organizations advocating wild steelhead conservation in which TU can add value, either through scientific and technical expertise or strategic and tactical advice.

One matter on which TU is already engaged is proposed open-pit mining operations in the headwaters of so-called “transboundary rivers” that originate in northern British Columbia and flow to the Pacific through Southeast Alaska. Some of the potentially affected rivers, like the Nass, contain large wild steelhead populations. TU is working at both the grassroots level in Southeast Alaska and in Washington D.C. to ensure that any mining development that occurs minimizes harm to water quality and habitat.





QUESTION: WILL THE INITIATIVE INCLUDE THE U.S. GREAT LAKES?

Answer: The native range of steelhead in the western U.S. is large – spanning 5 states – and it will require all of TU’s current capacity to successfully implement the Initiative there. That said, wild (but non-native) steelhead are well established in a number of Great Lakes river systems, and many anglers care deeply about them and want to see them managed well. Our intent is to expand our efforts to the Great Lakes as funding and resources allow.

QUESTION: HOW WILL THE WILD STEELHEAD INITIATIVE BE FUNDED?

Answer: By steelhead anglers who care. It is as simple as that. By financially supporting the Wild Steelhead Initiative, you will be leveraging more than \$7 million in funds TU is already putting on the ground to protect, reconnect and restore steelhead habitat in their native range. Those funds come from various sources, but what those sources do not -- and will not pay for -- are the critical science, organizing and communication elements of the Initiative, including the “care and feeding” of Wild Steelheaders United. Thus, sustaining the Initiative will require anglers who see its value to invest in it. Please consider becoming a financial supporter.

