Status of Steelhead in Alaska

**ABSTRACT**

Steelhead *Oncorhynchus mykiss* are found in streams and rivers of Alaska from Cape Muzon in Southeast (SE) Alaska to the Aleutian Peninsula of Southcentral (SC) Alaska at Port Moeller. As of 2013 a total of 4,435 km of known steelhead waters were documented within 369 drainages of the state. This has increased by 233 km and 50 streams since 2010, but many stream reaches in the state have not been surveyed for the presence of steelhead. The vast majority of runs are small, containing fewer than 200 adults while the largest known population in the Situk River, averages 7 - 9,000 adult kelts. Kodiak Island and the Kenai Peninsula streams also have runs from 200 to several thousand fish. Steelhead spawning in Alaska has been documented at elevations from 2 m in SE Alaska to 1,300 m in the Copper River drainage of SC Alaska. Significant sport fisheries occur in ~ 20 drainages. Yearly assessments of steelhead immigration are limited to 10 selected streams surveyed with snorkel counts, and 5 other streams assessed with weirs. These yearly assessments are done in streams in all the largest sport fishery areas, and are distributed throughout the known range of steelhead in SE Alaska. In 2012 most streams in SE Alaska showed a continuation of below average counts, but in 2013 most SE Alaska streams rebounded to slightly above or at long term median counts. Streams in SC Alaska were mostly lower than average for both 2012 and 2013 after peak counts in recent years. Steelhead length assessments measured on the Situk River, where greater than 35% of the Alaskan angler catch occurs have not decreased, but have fluctuated with overall abundance. Sport fisheries are conservatively managed with bait restrictions, spawning closures, yearly harvest limits of 2 fish and minimum size limits, or as catch and release only. Sport fishery catch of steelhead fell to 11,558 in 2011 then rebounded in 2012 to 19,202. Sport fishery harvest also fell to 133 fish in 2011 and then increased to 302 fish in 2012. Directed commercial fishing for steelhead is not allowed in Alaska. Incidental harvests in commercial salmon fisheries were reportedly < 300 fish per year for all of the last decade and were < 100 fish in 2012 and 2013. Reported subsistence harvests of steelhead for 2012 and 2013 were 45 and 36 respectively, mostly on Price of Whales Island. Overall resource management policy and regulation in Alaska is focused on preemptive management designed to avoid anthropogenic impacts to steelhead habitats and maintain the current abundance, age, and size attributes of wild steelhead populations across the state.