Status of Steelhead in Alaska

**ABSTRACT**

Steelhead *Oncorhynchus mykiss* are found in streams and rivers of coastal Alaska from Cape Muzon in Southeast (SE) Alaska to the Aleutian Peninsula of Southcentral (SC) Alaska at Port Moeller. As of 2016 a total of 4,435 km of known steelhead waters were documented within 369 drainages of the state. The State of Alaska Anadromous Waters Catalog (AWC) is an ongoing process to determine fish species found in waters across the state, and many waters have not yet been surveyed. The vast majority of the known runs are small, containing fewer than 200 adults while the largest 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 adult abundance are limited to 10 selected streams surveyed with snorkel counts, and 6 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 Alaska. For 2014 and 2015 most streams in SE Alaska showed a continuation of average or slightly above average counts. Streams in SC Alaska were more variable, with some streams well below average. Steelhead length assessment measured on the Situk River, where greater than 35% of the Alaskan angler catch occurs, has recently fluctuated with year 2015 lengths considerably smaller for both sexes. 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 10,115 in 2013 and in 2014 was 12,614, which is ~ half of average (23,000 fish). Sport fishery harvest fell to 181 and 134 fish for 2013 and 2014 respectively, also well below average. Directed commercial fishing for steelhead in Alaska is not allowed by regulation. Incidental harvests in commercial salmon fisheries were reportedly < 300 fish per year since the start of that regulation, but have increased to > 350 fish in 2015. Reported subsistence use of steelhead is rare, and remained below 100 fish per year for both 2014 and 2015. 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 the most heavily used wild steelhead populations. No hatchery releases of steelhead occur in the State.