

## SCOTT RIVER'S COHO SUCCESS STORY

# Let no good deed go unpunished

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Siskiyou Voices

The Scott River is recognized as the biggest producer of coho salmon in the Klamath River basin. It also shows significantly increasing coho numbers, now comparable to counts from 60 years ago. However, recent regulatory actions by state agencies are making the Scott River's good coho status not a badge of honor but the target of undeserved penalties. The motto for the Scott River's Coho Success Story should not become "Let no good deed go unpunished."

Yet that seems to be what's happening. Severe water curtailments by the state are being imposed on Scott River water users during this drought. Unlike the rest of California, all agricultural wells are affected here. In this 2022 growing season, Scott Valley irrigators are facing 100% cutbacks in their water use from all surface and groundwater sources unless they can negotiate a 30% reduction option, which isn't guaranteed. Losing farms due to bankruptcy is certainly possible as these are not "Big Ag" operations here. Economic impacts will be felt throughout the Scott Valley community and not just by farming families.

Why is this happening? Last year, fish advocates claimed the coho salmon run in the Scott River will soon go "extinct" if minimum instream flows are not met each month. Demands were made for the State Water Resources Control Board to use emergency powers under the Governor's Drought Emergency Declaration of May 2021 to curtail water use by Scott Valley farmers for their stream diversions as well as groundwater wells. The water board agreed that the "coho crisis" was serious and adopted such a curtailment last August for a 12-month period, expanding its regulatory jurisdiction to all groundwater users. This was a precedent-setting legal action that should send ripples throughout water users across the state.

The irony is that the data don't justify the action. Coho salmon were listed as threatened under the federal and state Endangered Species Acts for this northwest region of California and southern Oregon due to concern over declining population trends 20 years ago. Since then, the Scott River's coho numbers have trended upward. Its average annual coho run size is now close to 800 adults, as measured since 2007 by an underwater video camera by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW). Recent population figures should be compared to the only "historic" estimates available for the Scott River, which ranged from 800 to 2,000 coho in old agency reports from the early 1960s. Shouldn't this be cause for celebration instead

of punishment?

Despite many drought years and low flow conditions, the Scott River's coho population has continued to improve almost every year, CDFW's data shows. Each generation is defined as the brood year for when these 3-year-old adults return as spawners. The 2020 coho return was 1,671 adults, yet this brood year measured only 153 in 2008. In 2021, at least 800 spawners were found, up from only 80 in 2009. While a record number of 2,752 coho returned in 2013, drought conditions reduced the survival of the resulting juveniles. However, this brood year is rebounding, which indicates to many observers that coho are more resilient than previously recognized.

This increase in coho numbers in the Scott River is not accidental. Since the early 1990s, many Scott Valley landowners have focused on improving stream habitat for salmon and steelhead. Erosion controls on unsurfaced roads significantly reduced excessive stream sediment. Fish screens were installed on all water diversions to prevent incidental trapping of young fish. Extensive riparian fencing was added to keep livestock out of the streams.

Farmers have expanded the use of water efficient irrigation practices, such as center pivots and soil moisture sensors. Summer streamflow has been enhanced in coho-rearing tributaries through voluntary seasonal water leasing or permanent water dedications through efforts of the Scott River Water Trust. Other restoration actions, such as adding more wood for stream habitat and enabling native beavers to prosper, are led by the Siskiyou Resource Conservation District and the Scott River Watershed Council. "Efforts to enhance over-summering salmon habitat in the Scott River don't get as much credit as they deserve," said Joe Croteau, CDFW environmental program manager in Yreka, at a recent public meeting.

The saddest part of this extreme precedent-setting curtailment order is that it is based on the false narrative that coho salmon are facing extinction here. The pendulum has swung too far from what is reasonable or balanced, principles on which the State Water Code and the Public Trust Doctrine are supposedly based. Coho in the Scott can thrive, as the record shows, but state action does not need to cause the extinction of family farming in Scott Valley.

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