

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS  
Regarding the Status of the Westslope Cutthroat Trout

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Background:

On April 4, 2000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published a finding that the westslope cutthroat trout was not likely to become either a threatened or endangered species in the foreseeable future and therefore did not warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act.

On October 23, 2000, American Wildlands and four other environmental groups filed a lawsuit arguing that the Service acknowledged hybridization as a threat to the species but included hybrids in the overall westslope cutthroat trout population without providing a justification.

By Court order issued on March 31, 2002, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was directed to reconsider whether to list the westslope cutthroat as a threatened subspecies and to more thoroughly take into account the hybridization issue when making that decision. In addition, the Court directed the Service to present its scientifically based conclusion about the extent to which it is appropriate to include “hybrid” westslope cutthroat trout and fish of unknown genetic characteristics in the group of fish that we considered for listing.

The following are questions and answers regarding the Service’s finding:

**What is the Service’s finding?**

After a thorough review of all available scientific information, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that the westslope cutthroat trout does not warrant listing as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) because abundant, stable, and reproducing populations remain well distributed throughout its historic range.

**What information is this finding based upon?**

The Service based its finding on information contained in a 1999 status review as well as a 2003 updated status report prepared by the fish and game departments of the States of Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington, and the U.S. Forest Service. That report confirms that westslope cutthroat trout populations currently occupy 33,500 of its historic stream miles (59 percent) in the United States and genetically pure populations inhabit approximately 3,500 stream miles (57 percent of tested stream miles; 10 percent of occupied miles) and may inhabit as many as 12,600 miles of stream in which no potentially hybridizing fishes occur. Many of these genetically-pure populations of the fish are found in habitats protected by natural barriers preventing interbreeding with other trout subspecies.

**What criteria did the Service use to determine the appropriateness of including hybrids when determining the size of the westslope cutthroat population?**

The Service used the 2003 updated status report, as well as a position paper outlining conservation and management plans for cutthroat trout prepared by the fish and game departments for the States of Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming, to develop criteria for including hybrid westslope cutthroat trout stock in the overall westslope cutthroat trout population.

Using these criteria, a westslope cutthroat trout is defined as having at least 80% westslope cutthroat trout genes (the level at which a fish would conform to the scientifically-defined physical characteristics of that cutthroat trout subspecies). That percent of hybrid westslope cutthroat trout is not considered a threat to the continued existence of the subspecies, and will be considered as westslope cutthroat trout in assessing its status for potential listing under the ESA.

**What is the westslope cutthroat trout?** Westslope cutthroat trout is one of 14 subspecies of cutthroat trout native to the western United States. It is bright yellow, orange, and red and is generally distinguishable from other inland subspecies of cutthroat trout by the particular pattern of black spots that appear on the body.

**Where are westslope cutthroat trout found?** Westslope cutthroat trout are native to streams and lakes in the upper Columbia River basin of western Montana, northern and central Idaho, and southern British Columbia and Alberta; the upper Missouri River basin of Montana and northwest Wyoming; the upper South Saskatchewan River basin of Montana and Alberta; the Methow River and Lake Chelan drainages in Washington; and the John Day River drainage in Oregon.

Most of the habitat for westslope cutthroat trout lies on lands administered by federal agencies, particularly the U.S. Forest Service. Moreover, many of the strongholds for westslope cutthroat trout stocks occur within roadless or wilderness areas or national parks, all of which afford considerable protection to the species.

**What protections are afforded westslope cutthroat trout?** There are numerous federal and state regulatory mechanisms that, if properly administered and implemented, protect westslope cutthroat trout and their habitats throughout the range of the subspecies. In addition, the U.S. Forest Service, state game and fish departments, and National Park Service reported more than 700 ongoing projects directed toward the protection and restoration of westslope cutthroat trout and their habitats. Finally, westslope cutthroat trout accrue some level of protection from the ESA's Section 7 consultation process in geographic areas where westslope cutthroat trout distribution overlaps with the distributions of one or more ESA-listed fish species, specifically, bull trout *Salvelinus confluentus*, steelhead *O. mykiss*, and Pacific salmon *Oncorhynchus* species and their habitats on federal lands in the Columbia River basin.

July 2003