Press Release
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Report confirms hatchery best option for Clutha salmon restoration

An independent science report has confirmed that building a hatchery to rear and release juvenile salmon is the best way to restore sea-run salmon and enhance the lower Clutha River's sports fishery, the Clutha/Mata-Au Sportsfish and Habitat Trust announced today.

Trust chairperson Rick Boyd said the Trust has just received a statutory assessment it commissioned to inform the approvals and consents required for a hatchery.

The statutory assessment has provided clarity on the regulatory pathway and information needed to support meaningful consultation with mana whenua, consenting agencies and the local community.

"This is an important milestone for the Trust," Mr Boyd said.

"The wild sea-run Chinook salmon fishery in the lower Clutha River is 'functionally extinct' and has shown no sign of recovery in recent decades".

"The science indicates that a hatchery offers the most effective way to meet our core purposes. But we know this is only the beginning — we need to understand the process clearly and move forward carefully."

The Cawthron Institute, a leading authority on salmon research, was commissioned to conduct an independent assessment in 2024.

Its report concludes that a hatchery is the best available option to meet the Trust's two main purposes: enhancing sports fisheries values in the Clutha River and investigating the re-establishment of sea-run salmon in the lower river.

The hope is to create a put-and-take fishery where hatchery-raised juvenile salmon are released into the river below the Roxburgh Dam and eventually return from sea as adult fish for anglers to catch.

It is essential that a hatchery is located within the Clutha/Mata-Au catchment, the report says.

Landlocked Chinook salmon from lakes Wānaka and Hāwea could provide a potential source of broodstock. If possible, residual sea-run fish below the Roxburgh Dam and the Pomahaka River could also be used as broodstock.

Chinook salmon from California were introduced into the Clutha catchment in the early 20th century. But their runs declined significantly after the construction of the Roxburgh Dam in 1956.

“Before the dam, the Clutha River had an estimated annual spawning run of around 20,000 salmon,” the report says. “After the dam blocked access to the upper catchment, the run dropped to a few thousand in good years. In recent decades, it has fallen further to just a few hundred fish.”

The Trust was established to take over delivery of the Clutha River Sports Fish Mitigation Programme (SFMP), previously managed by Otago Fish & Game. The mitigation programme is funded by Contact Energy as a requirement of its resource consent to operate hydroelectric generation dams on the Clutha River.

While hatchery planning advances, the Trust has continued an active work programme in the past year.

Otago Fish & Game is delivering much of the fieldwork and reporting, including habitat restoration, angler surveys, fish population monitoring, and salmon spawning research across the catchment.

“These projects are giving us a science-based picture of where fish are spawning, how habitats are changing, and what opportunities exist to improve the fishery overall,” Mr Boyd said. “That includes both native and sports fish populations.”

He said that any future hatchery development would require engagement that took account of cultural values, including the perspectives of mana whenua.

“Salmon are a valued sports fish in the Clutha, but we also recognise they are a non-native species. It’s essential that we engage with to mana whenua and the wider community, and understand their views as part of this effort,” he said.

“The just completed statutory asssessment is about doing our due diligence and laying the groundwork for informed, respectful decision-making.”

The Trust will continue to share progress updates as it proceeds down the hatchery pathway and consultation begins.