

MCKENZIE RIVER GUIDES ASSOCIATION POSITION PAPER

Wild and Hatchery Fish in the Mainstem McKenzie River

February 6, 2010

Background:

Oregon Administrative Rule (OAR) 635-500-0268 (Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, McKenzie Subbasin Fish Management Policies and Objectives) provides for stocking of legal-size, hatchery produced rainbow trout in portions of the mainstem McKenzie River. It also calls for maintaining genetic diversity and distribution, maintaining or increasing abundance of wild rainbow and cutthroat trout, and providing diverse opportunities to angle for rainbow and cutthroat trout in the McKenzie River subbasin.

On December 9, 2008, criticism of the provision for stocking hatchery rainbows in the McKenzie appeared in a Westfly (www.westfly.com) forum. On September 17, 2009 and on October 28, 2009 the stocking policy was again criticized in Guest Viewpoint articles in the *Eugene Register Guard*. The October article also criticized the McKenzie River Guides Association (MRGA) and its partnership with ODF&W in carrying out the policy. On October 7, 2009 the MRGA supported the policy in a *Register Guard* Guest Viewpoint column. Trout Unlimited (TU) Chapter 678 and the Native Fish Society are continuing critics of the hatchery stocking policy. The TU chapter is actively working to end the policy.

The primary claim of critics of the hatchery stocking policy is that stocked trout are harming wild trout especially in the middle McKenzie (Forest Glen to Hayden Bridge). In supporting the policy, the MRGA has pointed out that stocking provides a variety of fishing opportunities responsive to angler preferences while maintaining strong populations of wild rainbow and cutthroat trout especially in the upper and lower McKenzie.

The MRGA has demonstrated a deep and continuing concern for wild resident McKenzie trout throughout the subbasin. Recent actions include:

- Raising and committing \$4500 to the 2005-2008 McKenzie River Native Trout Research Partnership focused on monitoring wild trout using passive integrated transponders (PIT);

- Submitting a proposal to ODF&W in February 2008 to limit angling to artificial flies and lures from Goodpasture Bridge upstream to Forest Glen boatramp between April 26-December 31; and,
- Pledging \$1600 in 2009 to the ODF&W partnership McKenzie River Native Trout genetic research project.

MRGA Position:

The current variety of fishing opportunities provided by ODF&W on the McKenzie River, including wild and hatchery trout, steelhead and salmon fisheries, is good public policy which should be continued. Accordingly, the MRGA strongly supports OAR 635-500-0268 that provides for stocking of legal-size, hatchery produced rainbow trout in portions of the mainstem McKenzie River and other considerations including providing diverse opportunities to angle for rainbow and cutthroat trout in the McKenzie River subbasin. We do so for two primary reasons:

- **The question of stocking hatchery rainbows in the McKenzie is a social, not a biological issue.**
- **Primary considerations in deciding the social issue are user preferences and the human value of sharing.**

Stocking as a Social Issue:

The factual issue about stocking hatchery trout in the McKenzie is about the fishing experiences and opportunities people want, not “saving the McKenzie Redside”. There are strong populations of wild rainbow and cutthroat trout especially in the upper (above Forest Glen) and lower (below Bellinger) McKenzie and in the South Fork McKenzie and Horse Creek as evidenced by electrofishing and creel information. Creel and other survey information and related inferences also indicate that genetic viability of wild rainbows and cutthroat in the middle McKenzie is not at risk. Since stocking is not a serious biological concern, it becomes one exclusively of social or user preferences.

User Preferences and Sharing:

Currently in the mainstem McKenzie about half the river is managed exclusively for wild trout with “catch and release” and artificial flies and lures. The other half is managed for hatchery trout with “catch and possess” and bait, and for wild trout with “catch and release”. For many years portions of the McKenzie have been successfully managed for both hatchery and wild native trout fishing opportunities. Much of the mainstem McKenzie is also successfully managed for hatchery and wild salmon and steelhead. The South Fork McKenzie and Horse Creek are managed for wild trout.

The “half-and-half” mix in the mainstem McKenzie is designed to provide a variety of fishing opportunities for rainbow and cutthroat trout in response to the McKenzie’s diverse social setting. The McKenzie River flows in relatively close proximity to the Eugene-Springfield Metro Area with a current human population exceeding 340,000. Largely in response to Eugene-Springfield citizens, ODF&W McKenzie River fisheries

management historically has provided a variety of opportunities and experiences including fishing for hatchery and wild resident trout, fishing with multiple baits and gear types, and “catch and release” for wild fish and “catch and possess” for hatchery fish. Since the late 1980s the fishing opportunity in the subbasin for hatchery resident rainbows and associated “catch and possess” has gradually declined while the fishing opportunity for wild trout and “catch and release” has increased. The current “half-and-half” mix of wild and hatchery resident trout fishing opportunity on the McKenzie mainstem appears responsive to those who actually fish the McKenzie with the exception of those calling for the elimination of the remaining resident hatchery trout fishery. This “half-and-half” mix of opportunity appears consistent with findings of *Oregon’s 2006 Angler Preference Survey of Annually Licensed Resident Anglers*, which found among other things that 60% of respondents said it didn’t matter whether they fished for wild or hatchery trout.

For the MRGA, the “real” issue associated with the concern about stocking hatchery rainbows in the McKenzie River is one of "natural resources sharing". The current policy based on providing a variety of fishing experiences and opportunities responsive to varied angling preferences including those for hatchery trout allows many different segments of the fishing public including youngsters and their families the opportunity to share in trout fishing success in a river boating setting. To limit the fishing experience and opportunity on the entire mainstem McKenzie to only those who would use a wild resident trout fishery while excluding those who prefer a hatchery-based “catch and possess” opportunity would be unfair. Such an approach would exclude legitimate and essential segments of the fishing public from the river for no compelling biological or social reasons while unnecessarily reserving the entire mainstem for the exclusive use of those preferring a wild fishery.

Finally, the McKenzie River, unlike the Deschutes and Metolius Rivers to which it is often compared is in many ways an "urban/suburban" river flowing in close proximity to hundreds of thousands of people with diverse fishing experience interests and preferences. The variety of McKenzie River fishing opportunities characterized by the “half-and-half” mix best serves this diverse public. For decades members of the MRGA have helped provide this mix by serving those seeking both wild and hatchery trout. This service continues to contribute significantly to the tourism and commerce of the McKenzie Valley and eastern Lane County.