

Walla Walla River Spring Chinook Reintroduction

A tribal success story

Photo: Marshal Hedlin



The Walla Walla River subbasin is located within the northeast portion of the aboriginal title lands of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. The headwaters of the Walla Walla River are in the Blue Mountains and contain important salmonid production areas for summer steelhead, rainbow trout, bull trout, mountain whitefish, and reintroduced spring chinook. The Walla Walla River enters the Columbia River at roughly river mile 315.

Spring chinook were extinct from the Walla Walla River for more than 80 years. The last run of more than a few fish was reported in 1925. Nine Mile (Reese) Dam, constructed in 1905, preceded the disappearance of spring chinook and caused the Walla Walla River to run dry each summer for nearly 100 years.



The Water Flows Again

Then in 2001, thanks to an agreement among three irrigation districts, the Umatilla tribe, and federal agencies, the Walla Walla River started flowing all year long once again. This agreement supplemented earlier tribal, state, and landowner partnerships to improve fish passage and habitat. These actions to restore instream flows improved the likelihood that the tribe's reintroduction program, started in 2000, would succeed.

Protecting and Restoring the First Foods

The Umatilla tribe's mission for its fishery and natural resource programs is "to protect, restore, and enhance the First Foods, water, salmon, deer, cous, and huckleberry, for the perpetual cultural, economic, and sovereign benefit of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation..." The tribe began its spring chinook reintroduction program because the tribe relies on spring chinook culturally and spiritually and recognizes the species' importance in the Walla Walla River's ecological functioning.

To jump-start the program, the tribe released surplus Umatilla and Ringold adult spring chinook



A salmon feast at a tribal longhouse. Salmon and water are the first of the First Foods. In the spring, when the tribes celebrate the salmon's return, tribal longhouses and churches must have spring chinook—no other fish will do—for their First Salmon ceremonies.



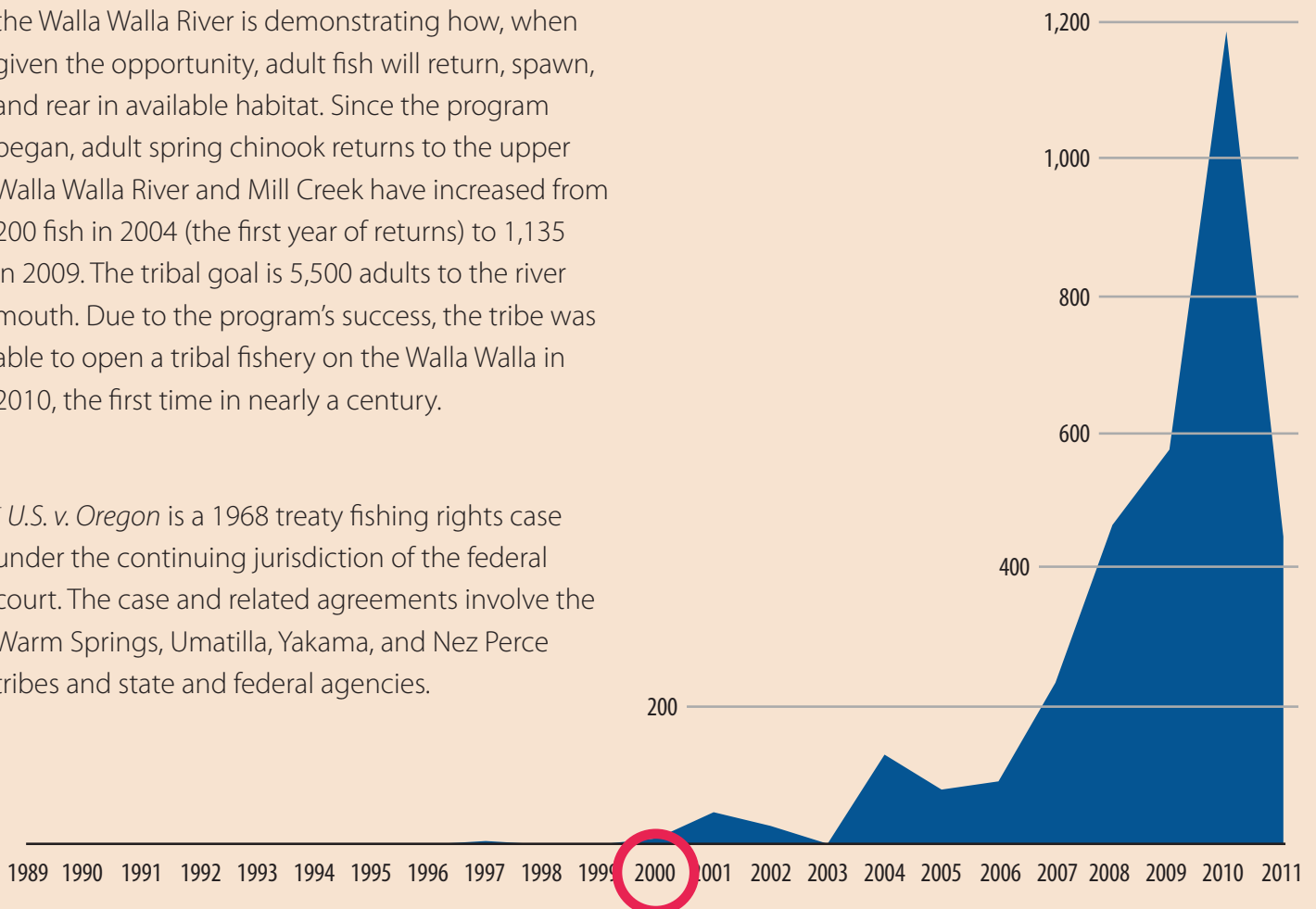
Spring chinook alevin or sac-fry hatched from eggs. Photo: USWFS Pacific

into the South Fork of the Walla Walla River. Needing additional broodstock, the Umatilla tribe was able to acquire an additional 250,000 spring chinook smolts from Carson National Fish Hatchery in Carson, Washington as a result of a *U.S. v. Oregon*[†] Interim Management Agreement. In 2005 the Umatilla tribe successfully reprogrammed these fish for release into the South Fork Walla Walla.

The Umatilla tribe's spring chinook reintroduction in the Walla Walla River is demonstrating how, when given the opportunity, adult fish will return, spawn, and rear in available habitat. Since the program began, adult spring chinook returns to the upper Walla Walla River and Mill Creek have increased from 200 fish in 2004 (the first year of returns) to 1,135 in 2009. The tribal goal is 5,500 adults to the river mouth. Due to the program's success, the tribe was able to open a tribal fishery on the Walla Walla in 2010, the first time in nearly a century.

[†] *U.S. v. Oregon* is a 1968 treaty fishing rights case under the continuing jurisdiction of the federal court. The case and related agreements involve the Warm Springs, Umatilla, Yakama, and Nez Perce tribes and state and federal agencies.

Total returns of Walla Walla River spring chinook (Adult counts at Nursery Bridge). Year reintroduction began is circled in red.



Cooperation and Creative Problem Solving

The Walla Walla Watershed Management Partnership, a broad collaboration with local governments and stakeholders, is part of a unique pilot program passed by the Washington State Legislature in 2009.

This voluntary program believes the key to augmenting stream flows for fish is for water users to employ greater local control and flexibility beyond what conventional water management options and regulation can deliver. The partnership works with water users to develop and implement reach-scale “Flow from Flexibility” water plans and operates the Walla Walla Water Bank, which accepts water rights conserved in local water plans, agreements not to divert, voluntary contributions, and mitigation transactions.

The Walla Walla project is coordinated with the Snake River Salmon Recovery Board, which is comprised of officials representing Walla Walla, Garfield, Asotin, Columbia, and Whitman counties, the Umatilla Tribe, and various state and federal agencies.

The Next Step: A Spring Chinook Hatchery

The Umatilla has a hatchery master plan for developing spring chinook production facilities for the Walla Walla Basin. The plan’s goals are to restore harvest and natural production while naturalizing a local stock to the system. The tribe believes these goals can be achieved in a reasonable amount of time by using hatchery technology rather than waiting for natural recovery through straying and recolonization, which may not occur within any relevant timeframe.

The endemic chinook population in the Walla Walla had been extirpated (extinct) for some 80

years when adults from Carson hatchery were first outplanted in 2000. The current level of natural production was reestablished from these Carson stock outplants. To improve natural production in the system, the proposed program would naturalize a run and work to build genetic and life-history diversity through best management practices and progressive hatchery actions. The master plan’s guidelines aim to create a “localized” stock and minimize hatchery effects on the reestablished natural populations. The recent returns of naturally reared fish derived from Carson stock adults outplanted in the Walla Walla seem to be performing well.



Walla Walla River near Stone Creek
Photo: Glenn Scofield-Williams

For More Information

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