

## ATTACHMENT 2

# STATUS OF STEELHEAD ANGLING IN THE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA STEELHEAD ESU

January 1998

## INTRODUCTION

The Northern California Evolutionarily Significant Unit (ESU) is composed of coastal streams from Redwood Creek south to, but not including, the Russian River. This includes many important steelhead fisheries such as the Eel, Mad, Navarro, Gualala, Garcia, and Mattole rivers. This report describes the current angling regulations to manage steelhead on the north coast, discusses harvest and angler impacts, and suggests recommendations that could be implemented if angling needs to be restricted further.

## ANGLING REGULATIONS

### Existing Regulations

The California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) normally adopts sportfishing regulations in December of odd-numbered years. These regulation changes and additions become effective the following March 1st. The Commission can also adopt emergency regulations, which become effective immediately upon filing with the Office of Administrative Law. Appendix A contains the full text of the regulations now in force.

Angling regulations for trout and salmon are of two types: general Sportfishing District regulations and Special Fishing Regulations that apply to specific waters. Sportfishing District general regulations apply if a Special Fishing Regulation for a specific water does not exist. Also, many coastal streams are subject to low flow closures: if the flows near the mouths of these streams recede to a specified level, then much of the stream and tributaries are closed to protect steelhead and salmon when they are most vulnerable to overharvest.

**General Regulations.** The Northern California ESU is in both the North Coast and North Central Coast Sportfishing Districts (the Sportfishing Districts are delineated by county, and the southern boundaries of Humboldt and Trinity counties comprise the boundary between the North Coast and North Central Coast Sportfishing Districts). The current general District regulations that apply to both sportfishing districts for steelhead are:

- 1) All streams that do not have Special Regulations are closed from November 16 through the end of April (the summer trout fishing season opens on the last Saturday in April and extends through November 15, with a two trout daily bag limit. This regulation effectively closes these streams to angling for adult steelhead.
- 2) For all streams in both districts no more than one trout over 22 inches in length may be taken per day. This effectively reduces the daily bag limit for most adult steelhead to one fish per day (two adult steelhead under 22 inches may be taken).

Because of the first regulation, above, and closures specified by special regulation, nearly all steelhead angling in the Northern California ESU is restricted to the mainstem streams that are not utilized for spawning or rearing. Summer steelhead holding habitat in the Van Duzen and M.F. Eel rivers and Redwood Creek is closed to angling year-round. For the Mad River, the only other summer steelhead stream in this ESU, there is a zero limit for adult summer steelhead in the upper reach of the river that contains suitable overwintering habitat. It is the intent of the Department to recommend to the Commission that most steelhead spawning and rearing areas in the North Coast District remain closed to steelhead angling.

**Special Regulations.** There are numerous special regulations for waters in the Northern California ESU. These special regulations restrict angling on specific streams to non-spawning and rearing reaches, i.e. the lowermost sections. The streams are: Albion, Bear, Big, Eel, Van Duzen, Elk, Garcia, Gualala, Little, Mattole, Navarro, Noyo, and Tenmile rivers and Alder, Brush, Cottoneva, Elk, Freshwater, Greenwood, and Usal creeks. There are also special regulation on the M.F. Eel and Mad rivers and Redwood Creek to protect summer steelhead.

**Low Flow Closures.** Nearly all steelhead streams in the Northern California ESU open to adult steelhead angling as described in the above list are subject to low flow closures (Table 1). The flow standard for the Russian River is used in adjacent rivers due to a lack of individual streamflow gauges in those areas. This is done to protect steelhead and salmon that may be restricted in their migration due to inadequate stream depth and flow, consequently subjecting them to increased angling pressure as they congregate in pools below the restricted passage areas.

The mainstem of the Eel River downstream of the S.F. Eel River confluence is closed when the flow in the mainstem at Scotia is less than 350 cfs. The low flow closure can be for significant time periods at the beginning of the October through February steelhead angling season. For example, the 350 cfs minimum flow was not met for 36 and 60 days in the 93/94 and 94/95 seasons, respectively.

### **New Regulation Changes**

In addition to the above existing regulations, the Commission has recently adopted more restrictive regulations for the North Coast and North-Central Sportfishing Districts, which will become effective March 1, 1998. These recent changes include:

- **Minimum size limit.** For all streams in the North Coast Sportfishing District, there will be a minimum size limit of eight inches to protect juvenile steelhead from harvest. Research on steelhead in the Trinity River and elsewhere has shown that most juvenile steelhead emigrate to the ocean at a size less than eight inches.
- **Gear restriction.** To minimize mortality of caught-and-released juvenile and adult steelhead, gear will be restricted to barbless hooks.

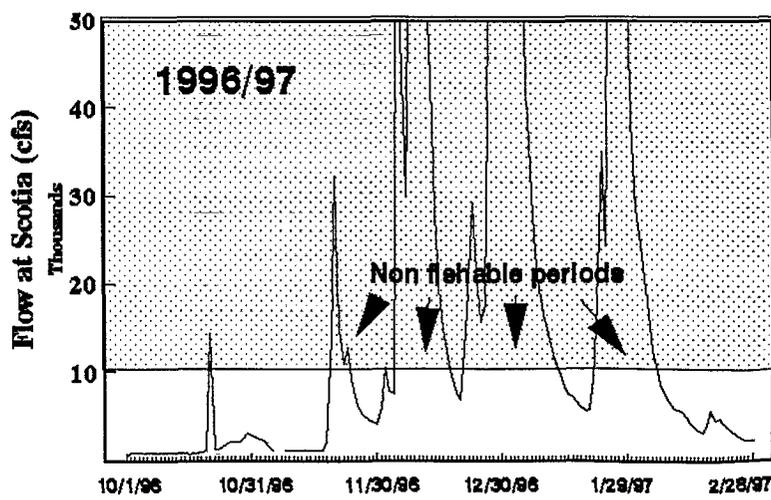
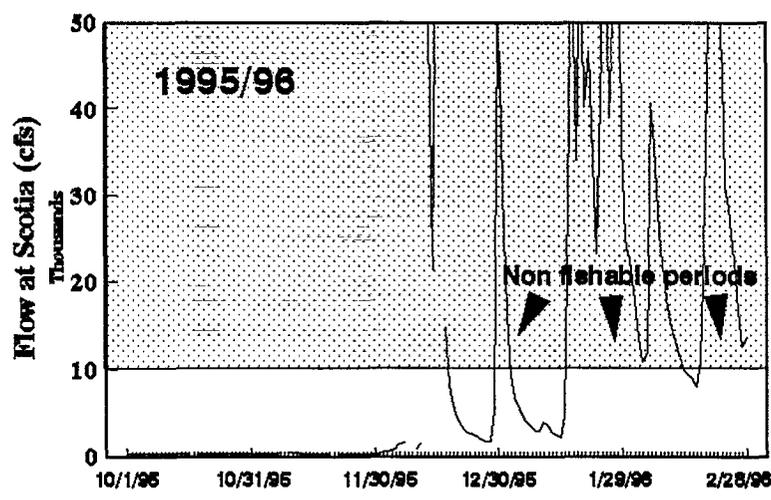
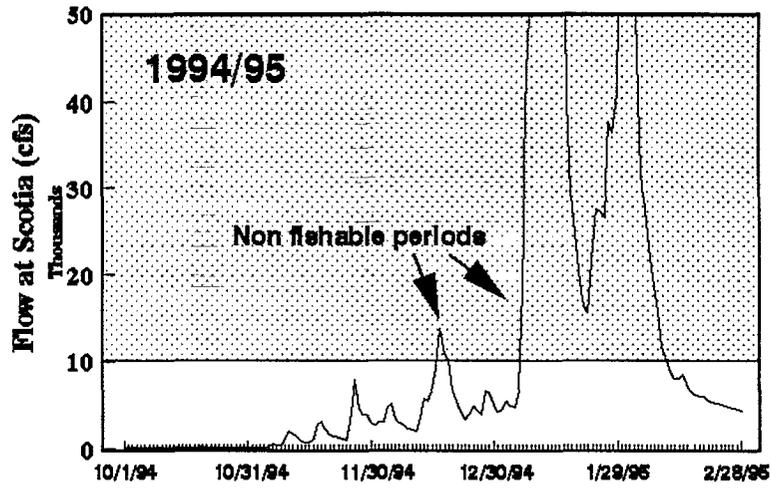
In addition to the above changes, the Department has proposed to mark all hatchery steelhead statewide so that they can be differentiated from naturally spawned fish. Steelhead at Mad River Hatchery will be fin-clipped this year.

<b>STREAM</b>	<b>MINIMUM FLOW (cfs)</b>
Eel River, mainstem below S.F. Eel River Confluence	350
S.F. Eel River	150
Van Duzen River	150
Mad River	200
Mattole River	150
Redwood Creek	300
All coastal streams in North-Central Sportfishing District	500 in Russian River

Table 1. Low flow closures in steelhead streams in the Northern California ESU

### NATURAL CONSTRAINTS ON STEELHEAD ANGLING

Adult steelhead tend to migrate on high flows when conditions are not conducive to angling, especially in rivers not regulated by major dams. Thus, climatic and hydrographic conditions play a substantial role in limiting steelhead angling opportunities and success, in addition to constraints placed on anglers by angling regulations. According to knowledgeable anglers and fishing guides along the north coast, the entire Eel River system becomes unfishable due to high flows and turbid water when mid-Eel River flows reach approximately 10,000 cfs. Using this as a benchmark, the Eel River system was unfishable for 39, 48, and 58 days during the 1994-95, 1995-96, and 1996-97 seasons, respectively (Figure 1). This is equivalent to 26%, 32%, and 38% of the October 1 through February 28 season for these years, respectively, and when coupled with low flow closures early in the fall, resulted in even less fishing opportunity.



**Figure 1. Fishability of the Eel River**