



News Release

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
PO Box 638, Pendleton, OR 97801
Phone: 541-276-3165 Fax: 541-276-3095
www.umatilla.nsn.us

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Contact: Gary James, 541-966-2371

Adult salmon killed by high water temperatures

In early August, 239 Spring Chinook salmon died in the Grand Ronde River as a result of high water temperatures.

Gary James, Fisheries Manager for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, reports that in the last two weeks of July during extremely high temperatures, the CTUIR Fisheries staff in the Grande Ronde Basin began observing an accumulation of spring Chinook near Starkey on the upper Grande Ronde River. As water temperatures began to rise, staff began closely monitoring the behavior and movement of these fish. Even though the water temperature approached the high 70's in the daytime, many fish were not moving upstream to cooler spawning areas and were not showing negative effects.

James said that when his staff checked conditions on July 31, temperatures had escalated to near 83 degrees and fish started dying. At that point they began capturing the salmon and hauling them upstream to cooler water. Staff worked over the weekend of Aug. 1 to salvage and haul 130 adults and 10 jacks upstream. Only one early morning trip per day was possible as water temperatures rose too much to continue handling and stressing fish.

The salvage operation, however, was not able to save 140 adult and 99 jack salmon and they died. James said these fish were apparently hanging on to false security by holding in some relatively cooler deep pool water, which eventually became too hot.

“This incident is not the only recent example of temperature-related fish mortality,” said James. “Currently the mortality rate for the 2009 spawning season in the upper Umatilla River is also higher than what has been observed in previous years. A major die-off of spring Chinook occurred in the Middle Fork John Day River in 2007 during a hot summer period,” he said.

In spite of this incident, James says there is still a large number of salmon that are getting ready to spawn in the upper Grande Ronde. The 2009 upper Grande Ronde return was highest in recent history and there are an estimated 250 surviving fish in the upper Grande Ronde River at this time (including the 140 fish saved by the emergency trap and haul operation).

James and his staff are developing a detailed plan and will coordinate with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to try and prevent this kind of incident from happening again.

“This emphasizes the importance of holistic watershed management which protects water quality. The largest component of our BPA-funded projects is habitat enhancement with emphasis on the upper Grande Ronde,” said James.

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