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### **Marin County's Golden Opportunity to Protect Region's Endangered Coho Salmon**

by Jeff Miller

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If we can recover salmon anywhere, it ought to be in wealthy, liberal Marin. Yet the county's supervisors continue to approve development policies putting interests of a few property owners and developers above protecting our salmon.

Our state's coho, which once numbered half a million spawning fish, are now on the verge of extinction and protected as an endangered species. Along the Central California coast, from Santa Cruz to Mendocino, coho are down to less than 5 percent of their historic numbers. The National Marine Fisheries Service calls their decline an "extinction vortex."

The last large run of coho salmon in the region occurs in bucolic West Marin, much of which is protected in state and federal parks. Just a half hour from Bay Area urban centers, Lagunitas Creek supports 10 to 20 percent of all remaining Central Coast coho. Now, fewer than 200 to 300 salmon return to spawn most years.

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Marin County just illegally bypassed a court order protecting endangered coho salmon habitat to promote streamside development that salmon scientists and the county's own studies say will jeopardize salmon survival.

Although there are many factors affecting salmon — from dams blocking spawning habitat to legacy impacts of past logging — we must protect riparian trees and prevent excessive development beside salmon streams to recover coho.

Marin updated its Countywide Plan in 2007, enacting rules governing streamside development and designating "stream conservation areas." Salmon experts, aquatic biologists, and conservation and fishing groups asked for stronger protections in San Geronimo Valley, the most important coho spawning area in the Lagunitas Creek watershed.

SPAWN, a local salmon advocacy group, spent years working with the county, seeking science-based, common-sense development rules. But the county refused to rewrite the weak streamside development standards. In 2012, a judge wisely imposed a freeze on further development along San Geronimo Creek until the county approves a stream ordinance that protects salmon habitat.

Marin supervisors recently pushed through an interim ordinance over the objections of conservation and fishing groups. It allows excessive development in San Geronimo Valley. The supervisors thumbed their nose at the

judge, the public, scientists and salmon advocates, illegally exempting the weakened ordinance from environmental review and adding a self-destruct clause that nullified the ordinance once salmon advocates challenged it in court last month.

The county disingenuously claims it has complied with the court order in passing an ordinance it admits is suspended and will not apply to any development proposals. A surreal county statement asserts that in the absence of a stream ordinance, existing development codes adequately protect salmon habitat. These are the codes that allow development to occur within 20 feet of streambanks along salmon streams, a distance which scientific studies show severely degrades salmon habitat.

Neighboring Sonoma County is ten times more protective of salmon habitat along the Russian River. Their codes prevent new development within 200 feet of salmon streams, with very few exceptions.

Marin's flawed ordinance would allow full build-out of 955 currently developed and 205 undeveloped lots in San Geronimo Valley. Nearly a million square feet next to the most important regional salmon spawning habitat could be subject to additional development, removal of vegetation and addition of hard surfaces that will alter runoff patterns and reduce water quality.

We cannot degrade any more stream habitat if we want coho to be around for our grandkids. It's nonsensical to allow further development along such a critical stream corridor. Marin County can, and should, do better for salmon. Marin supervisors should quit wasting taxpayer money playing politics with endangered wildlife and pass a science-based stream ordinance that gives our coho a fighting chance.

Jeff Miller is a conservation advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity, has been working on recovery of salmon in the Bay Area since 1997, and is a resident of the Lagunitas Creek watershed.

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