

Some streams may be reopened for fishing

By JIM OWEN ? Daily Press Staff ?

Some streams on the Gila National Forest, closed to fishing for decades to allow for recovery of a native trout species, may be reopened as soon as next summer. The action is expected to result from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's announcement last week that, on Aug. 17, it will downlist the Gila trout from endangered to threatened status under the federal Endangered Species Act. Which streams will be reopened, and what regulations will be enacted, have not been determined.

"The way it will work is that the Gila Trout Recovery Team (and other entities, including the Forest Service) will make recommendations," said Art Telles, Gila National Forest biologist. "The state Game Commission will make the final decision. ... We're probably talking next summer, or something like that."

Game Commission member M.H. "Dutch" Salmon of Silver City predicted the commission will — following a public-comment period — "vote to allow some fishing" in creeks that have been closed.

"We could accept the recommendations as they are, or modify them," he said, expressing hope the downlisting will be "an opportunity to patch up some hard feelings" that have developed between anglers and government agencies over stream closings.

"I think (reopening some creeks) by next summer is a reasonable goal," Salmon added. "As a fisherman, I think I would be satisfied (if that happened)."

Jerry Monzingo, Gila National Forest fisheries biologist and a member of the recovery team, detailed the administrative process.

"Once the final rule is published (by the FWS), they will have to wait to see whether they get sued over that final rule," he said. "If it doesn't end up in court, sometime this fall the Game Department and Fish and Wildlife will start discussing with the recovery team potential streams that could be reopened, and what regulations would be applied. The Game Department will then have to get the regulations into a proclamation."

Monzingo continued: "There might be some catch-and-release; there may be a two-fish limit on some streams. We don't know, yet. ... It's not going to be that, right away, every stream is open and you can go catch six Gila trout. Several of the populations are very small and could not withstand any (fishing) pressure. The recovery team will provide the population numbers and make recommendations on which streams could support any kind of take."

Personnel with the FWS, Forest Service and recovery team “have had some discussions in the past” about which streams could be eligible for reopening, according to Monzingo.?

“Black Canyon has come up” as one of the streams that could be opened, he said. “Someday, they may also stock Gilas in the Forks area (on the Gila River, near the cliff dwellings); up the West Fork of the Gila; and in Lake Roberts and Snow Lake.” ?

The FWS final rule stipulates that the four streams that harbored Gila trout when the recovery process began -- Main Diamond, South Diamond, Whiskey and Spruce creeks -- will not be reopened, because they contain the source fish used for stocking.

After streams are re-opened, ongoing monitoring will enable personnel to “get a handle on how the populations are holding up,” Monzingo said.? “We would just as soon that, eventually, the Gila trout is the only trout stocked in its native range; that we get away from stocking rainbows,” he told the Daily Press.

According to Monzingo, Gila trout will grow to the same size as rainbows if they have the same food and other conditions.

“There is potential for economic good to come out of this. A lot of people have been waiting to fish Gila trout, and they will have to come to the Gila to do that,” he said. “There are people out there who spend big bucks to go places to fish. They have a ‘life list’ (similar to those kept by bird-watchers) of fish they have caught.”

Monzingo pointed out that the White Mountain Apache Tribe in eastern Arizona has experienced increased tourism since reintroducing the native Apache trout in streams and lakes on the reservation.

The government declared the Gila trout an endangered species in 1966, when its range had been reduced to the four streams on the Gila National Forest. It was among the original 30 species listed for protection under the federal Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Through recovery efforts, there are now Gila trout in Grant, Catron and Sierra counties, and in Gila and Greenlee counties in Arizona. Efforts to protect the trout, the only salmonid native to the Gila River system, began in 1958, when streams known to harbor the species were closed to fishing.

After passage of the 1973 ESA, a recovery team was formed, with representatives of the Forest Service, FWS, and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. The team developed a plan, which called for transplanting stocks from wild populations into other streams. ?

The actions became controversial when federal personnel began poisoning streams with antimycin to kill nonnative rainbow and brown trout before reintroducing the native species. Anglers and conservationists, concerned about possible unintended consequences resulting from use of the poison, won a victory when the FWS agreed to discontinue the practice on the Gila National Forest.

"Spanning over 20 years, recovery of the Gila trout has been at times harrowing," wrote Michael Robinson of Pinos Altos, a staffer with the Center for Biological Diversity. "Populations (have been) lost to fire, exposed to toxic fire retardants, and found to be hybridized with nonnative trout. These threats necessitate Gila trout remaining a threatened species and continued efforts to increase the trout's range."

The center supports the downlisting, while stressing that "the first priority should be to continue reintroducing wild Gila trout to additional secure areas of their historic range."

The FWS announcement was hailed by members of the Gila Fish & Gun Club, who have been waiting for years to return to the streams. However, Salmon noted, not everyone backs the plan. The Truchas, New Mexico , chapter of Trout Unlimited contends the Gila trout has not been sufficiently recovered to warrant downlisting.

?Jim Owen may be reached at jowen@cybermesa.com.