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GRANTS PASS, Ore.—Ten groups of steelhead from Southern California to Washington will retain Endangered Species Act protection under a new policy that lists only those that spend time in the ocean, exempting fish that remain in their native rivers, NOAA Fisheries announced Friday.

The change in policy was prompted by a suggestion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has jurisdiction over trout and steelhead that remain in rivers, that the two agencies adopt the same policy for defining steelhead populations. NOAA Fisheries retained the old policy for salmon, said Garth Griffin, fisheries biologist for NOAA Fisheries in Portland.

While steelhead are the same genus as salmon, they are different

species and have much different life histories.

Most steelhead migrate to the ocean, particularly from coastal rivers, but some stay behind in the river their whole lives, particular in rivers far from the ocean. While salmon die after returning to their native rivers to spawn, some steelhead survive to return to the ocean and spawn again. Tests have shown steelhead and rainbow trout from the same rivers are genetically identical, despite their behavioral differences.

The decision by NOAA fisheries was applauded by Trout Unlimited and the Native Fish Society in Portland, which said counting steelhead and genetically identical rainbow trout in the same population groups could lead to inflated fish numbers that could result in removing

protections for some steelhead that need it.

“I think it was a little bit of bureaucratic infighting that led to this, but I think it was the right result,” said Jeff Curtis of Trout Unlimited.

However, David Hogan of the Center for Biological Diversity said it was bad news for steelhead in Southern California, which are in such bad shape that the resident fish need to be protected as well as the fish that go to the ocean, so that none of their genetic diversity is lost.

“For the central and Southern California populations, this is a very poor decision with almost no scientific basis,” Hogan said. “So it is possible that this could end up in court again.”

The decision also downgraded protection

for Upper Columbia River steelhead in eastern Washington from endangered to threatened.

Bill Bakke of the Native Fish Society objected to that decision, saying those steelhead have a particularly hard time because there are so many dams between the ocean and their spawning grounds. Steelhead that survive to spawn again are often killed trying to get back downstream because while there are provisions made to help small juvenile fish headed downstream, there are no measures taken for large adult fish, he said.

NOAA Fisheries re-examined its 1998 threatened and endangered species listing decisions on steelhead and salmon after a federal court ruling found that wild fish and hatchery fish in the same population group had to be considered together when listings are being determined. Though plaintiffs in that case had hoped it would lead to some runs of salmon being taken off the

endangered species list, so far it has not.

The old policy put salmon and steelhead in groups known as evolutionarily significant units, or ESUs, based on genetic similarity and the ability to breed together. Because resident rainbow trout and anadromous steelhead can breed together, they were included in the same ESU.

The new policy, known as a distinct population segment, takes into consideration additional factors, including physical size and characteristics, and behavioral differences.