

Progress Report - October 29, 1987

Fish Management Plan - Drift Creek (Aisea System)

- Management plan adopted by the Commission 1979

- Management objectives are being met.

1979
adopted

FISH MANAGEMENT PLAN

DRIIFT CREEK
(Alsea River System)

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

Fish Division
August 1979

DRIFT CREEK ^{1/} FISH MANAGEMENT PLAN

INTRODUCTION

Drift Creek is being managed for wild fish. Good, basic information for management is available because data on cutthroat, steelhead, and coho salmon populations have been collected since 1959 as part of the Alsea Watershed Study.

Drift Creek enters Alsea Bay at RM 3 (Fig. 1). It contains approximately 68 miles of fish production water and produces fair populations of resident cutthroat and good numbers of anadromous cutthroat, winter steelhead, and coho and chinook salmon. Fish have not been regularly stocked in Drift Creek, but all four species are released into the Alsea. The main stem of Drift Creek above Bohannon Falls is closed to salmon and steelhead fishing to protect spawning fish.

Maintenance of water quality, summertime streamflows, riparian vegetation, and prevention of stream channel alterations are key elements in protecting the capability of this stream to sustain natural production of all salmonids.

In July 1979, the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission accepted the Department's recommendation to manage Drift Creek for wild trout and steelhead. It was also decided to continue managing salmon by relying on natural production until we develop a coast-wide salmon management plan. At that time, staff biologists will decide on a final recommendation to the Fish and Wildlife Commission regarding the need or desirability for releasing hatchery salmon in the system.

HABITAT

Land ownership is mixed public and private, and riparian vegetation ranges from poor to good. Most of the watershed is in timber production. The main stem of 29 miles averages less than 50 feet in width and winds through a deep, rugged canyon. The stream is accessible by road only near the mouth and from about RM 17 to 26. The area between RM 10 and 17 is essentially unspoiled wilderness. Most of the lower 20 miles of Drift Creek has excellent riparian habitat. This section of stream is characterized by cutbanks, large boulders, and logs. Streamside vegetation consists of a solid overstory of alder, fir, and cedar with dense vine maple, devils club, and salmonberry underneath. Stream gradient ranges from flat to steep and streamflow varies from 30 to over 100 cfs. Summer water temperatures reach 67 F. No barriers are present in the main stem. Spawning gravel appears adequate for the existing fish populations.

The US Forest Service (Siuslaw National Forest) has proposed designating 3,800 acres of forest land in the drainage as the Drift Creek Unroaded Area, which would be managed for dispersed recreation and wildlife habitat. This would encompass approximately 6 miles of main stem Drift Creek, which is the largest unroaded fishable section of stream in Lincoln County.

The habitat in three headwater tributaries of Drift Creek, Deer, Flynn, and Needle Branch creeks, has been extensively studied as part of the Alsea Watershed Study which began in 1959.

^{1/} Alsea River System.

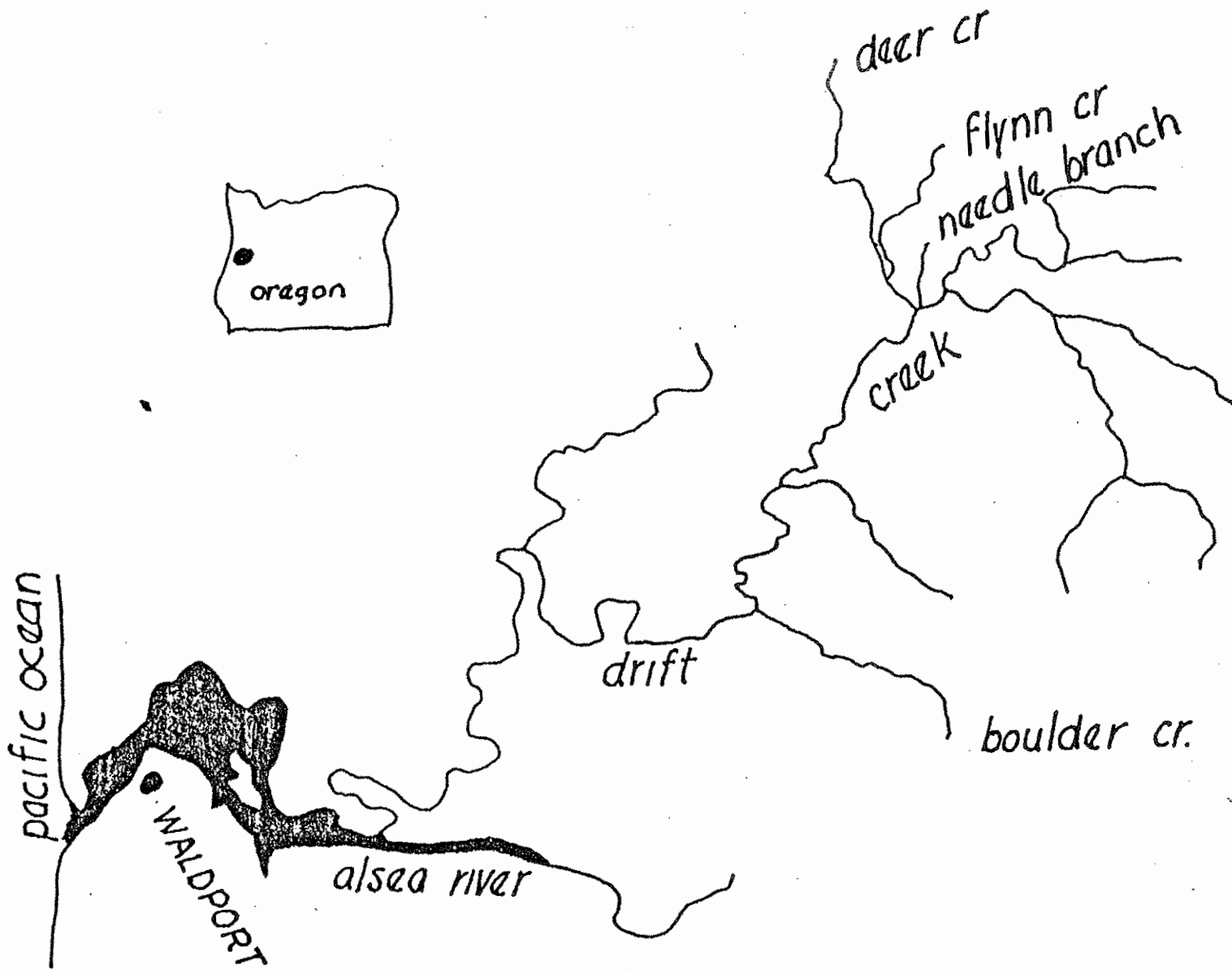


Fig. 1. Drift Creek

-2-

DRIFT CREEK

scale 1" = 2 miles

TROUT

Populations

Resident and sea-run cutthroat populations are found throughout the system. Distinguishing between resident and anadromous cutthroat (juveniles or adults) is difficult because some individuals remain in the stream up to 5 years before migrating. Others may move to the estuary and no further. Scale reading has shown a total of 12 life-history patterns.

Trout populations have been estimated on three headwater streams in relation to logging practices. Flynn Creek (not logged) populations have ranged from 500 to 800 trout sampled in approximately 4,000 feet. Deer Creek (clear cut, not burned, buffer strips left) populations have ranged from 700 to 1,300 trout in the 6,800 feet sampled. Needle Branch (clear cut, slash burned, no buffer strips) populations have ranged from 50 to 350 cutthroat in the 3,000 feet of stream sampled. Population estimates are continuing on Flynn Creek and Needle Branch as a partial continuation of the Alsea Watershed Study.

Fishery

Angling pressure is moderate for trout. Much of the system does not have roads and receives light pressure. We estimate less than 1,000 angler days of use throughout the watershed, with most pressure on the sea-run portion in the main stem.

Trout regulations are: 10 trout 8 inches or over per day, not more than 5 of which may be 12 inches or over, from late May through October, and 2 trout 12 inches or over per day in the main stem, November-December and January-March.

STEELHEAD

Populations

Drift Creek has a good run of native winter steelhead which utilize about 65 miles of the system. Adult steelhead are generally present in the main stem from late December through April. Fish spawn in tributaries and the main stem from February through April. The main stem is the major rearing area with juveniles remaining in the stream from 1 to 3 years before migrating to the ocean.

Variation in annual rainfall and resultant flows play a major role in determining the growth and numbers of smolts produced in the system. The size of the run normally fluctuates between 1,000 and 2,000 adults per year.

Fishery

The entire main stem is open to steelhead fishing from late May until the end of March the following year. The bag limit is 2 per day and there are no special regulations in effect. Angling pressure is light with catch estimates ranging up to 150 fish per year. Some of the best steelhead fishing area in the lower reaches of Drift Creek is in private ownership and not open to the public. However, good fishing area can be reached by hiking through rugged, steep terrain below RM 17. Present angling pressure is not influencing production in the system.

SALMON

Populations

Drift Creek supports good annual runs of coho and fall chinook and a small run of spring chinook. Although subjective, we estimate annual runs average about 4,800, 3,000, and 100 fish, respectively. Drift Creek is one of the most important salmon producing tributaries of the Alsea River system.

Coho were stocked in Drift Creek during the 1960's but are not presently stocked in this system. Coho use about 65 miles, fall chinook 25 miles, and spring chinook 24 miles of stream in this subbasin. Life-histories of these fish are probably similar to other midcoast stocks.

Population estimates for adult and juvenile coho were obtained in three tributaries--Needle Branch, Deer Creek, and Flynn Creek--for several years as part of a long-term study. This information may prove useful in assessing if escapements are adequate and habitat in the system is being used to its optimum by coho.

Fishery

Coho and fall chinook produced in this system are caught in ocean salmon fisheries off the Pacific coast in common with similar stocks produced elsewhere. A few fish, probably a combined total of about 100 per year, are caught in Drift Creek. Lack of access probably contributes to the small catch.

OBJECTIVES

1. Maintain the natural fish producing capabilities of Drift Creek by applying existing laws and regulations to protect and improve stream habitat. This largely involves close coordination with private landowners and public agencies controlling the use of water and adjacent land resources and in taking action to stem habitat losses before they happen. It is particularly important to work closely with those interests involved with logging and road building in the watershed.
2. Maintain adult escapements and populations of juvenile fish necessary for optimum utilization of fish producing capabilities of the system. This in part could be accomplished by periodically reexamining fish populations using the three study stream tributaries and in taking management action to assure that adequate escapements are maintained.
3. Maintain as an unroaded area the 3,800 acres of public land, including 6 stream miles of the main stem of Drift Creek, proposed by the US Forest Service for that designation. This area is essentially wilderness. The setting enhances the production capability of the stream and the experience of those who seek the solitude of the canyon. This section of stream provides a unique opportunity to provide a fishery for wild steelhead, salmon, and trout in a wilderness setting.
4. Monitor findings of the consultant who is doing inventory work on Flynn Creek and Needle Branch.