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## A Government Fish Story

By [Frank R. Stephens](#) Posted 11/05/1999 03:00 AM ET

From the Atlantic to the Pacific, headlines proclaim that salmon are in decline. The National Marine Fisheries Service, the government agency charged with protecting these fish, has [listed](#) salmon on both coasts as threatened or endangered.

The culprit, they tell us, is habitat degradation from such things as development, soil [runoff](#) from logging, adverse weather conditions and decreased river flows from dams. However, the greatest threat to the survivability of the once flourishing species may turn out to be government itself.

To support their claim that salmon populations are at record lows, federal and state agencies have devised a systematic plan to [kill](#) fish by the thousands. For example, Oregon state hatchery workers, since 1997, have carried out a program to kill returning hatchery fish. At the Fall Creek Hatchery in the Alsea River basin, 1,500 hatchery coho were clubbed to death in one day with baseball bats, stripped of their eggs and sold for fish bait and fertilizer.

In January 1999 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service admitted that its Coleman National Fish Hatchery on the Sacramento River had slaughtered 343,000 baby chinook salmon and planned to kill another 700,000. Meanwhile, California's state-run Nimbus Fish Hatchery on the American River had destroyed 2.2 million fall-run salmon eggs to reduce the number of fish. The Fish Sniffer sport fishing publication reported hatchery officials revealed they had decreased hatchery production from 20 million to 12.9 million at the request of National Marine Fisheries Service biologists. [All](#) of this is very puzzling since salmon used for hatchery propagation originated from naturally spawned populations and are indistinguishable from wild salmon now listed as threatened.

Historically, Atlantic salmon have numbered around half a million.

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However, 1,758 wild salmon returned to U.S. rivers in 1997 with no estimate made of returning hatchery salmon. National Marine Fisheries Service admitted in a published report, Evaluating the effects of past stockings on native Atlantic salmon . is difficult due to the paucity of information regarding the number of fish that returned from stocking efforts.

Even though there may be an abundance of hatchery salmon returning each [year](#), Defenders of Wildlife recently sued the NMFS for not listing the Atlantic salmon as endangered. Apparently, the NMFS has now succumbed to the pressure agreeing to propose the listing. However, Endangered Species Act listing decisions are supposed to be based on science, not political pressure.

Does any of this outrage you? It should! Captive breeding is a tool to bring species back from the edge of extinction. Here, however, the slaughter of hatchery-bred fish is being used to push this species to the brink of extinction. Of course, this action gives federal regulators unprecedented control over [local](#) land-use planning.

Federal regulators can now take control of all logging, farming, grazing and development on thousands of acres of so-called potential habitat. They [will](#) also now control private activity on privately owned [property](#). Was this the true agenda?

While Pacific Legal Foundation has sued to stop the needless killing of coho in Oregon, there is more we need to understand. The bureaucrats told us this is an environmental crisis. We now know the real crisis is in the attempt of these bureaucrats to create an emergency in [order](#) to extend the reach of their power! Frank R. Stephens is communications officer for Pacific Legal Foundation.

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