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Oregon conference discusses protecting wild salmon

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PORTLAND, Ore. —Biologist Rich Lincoln worries that the fragile balance of endangered salmon runs are threatened by an outdated hatchery system.

Fishery managers have known for years that hatchery-raised salmon aren't as robust as wild fish, and that their lack of genetic diversity means whole fisheries may collapse under unfavorable ocean conditions.

But an international conference of scientists and fisheries managers meeting in Portland this week is looking at less-studied impacts - disease, predation and competition for food - and how to overhaul a hatchery system that may hurt wild salmon more than it helps.

"There is alarm," said Lincoln, director of the Portland-based nonprofit, State of the Salmon, which organized the conference. "The question is, do you need to see the results of the inevitable to see the collaboration that nations need to take?"

Five billion hatchery fish are pumped into the northern Pacific yearly and account for as much as 90 percent of the young fish entering the ocean. Almost the entire Japanese fishery comes from hatcheries, and the percentage is rising from Alaska to California. The Columbia River basin relies heavily on hatchery fish, especially chinook.

And regions that still have fairly healthy wild runs - the Gulf of Alaska and Russia's Sea of Okhotsk - are being overfished, said Peter Rand, a conservation biologist with State of the Salmon.

"Salmon are going to need every chance they can get to make it in these environments," Rand said.

A report by Oregon State University last year showed that hatchery fish can cause genetic problems in their wild-born cousins, so that even fish that survive to reproduce in the wild have fewer offspring.

Lincoln said he hoped the conference would produce policy recommendations for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which oversees recovery for endangered salmon species on the Pacific coast. Possible recommendations could include a stronger effort to keep

hatchery fish separate from wild salmon in spawning streams and reducing the number of wild salmon caught in fisheries.

"We have the opportunity to address things now," Lincoln said. "There isn't a magic or easy answers. But there's a way to look at costs and benefits together."