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Opinion | Leah Hemberry: Dredge mining bill would protect Wenatchee Valley watershed

I grew up at the confluence of the Wenatchee River and the Peshastin Creek on a pear and apple orchard. My childhood was filled with memories of heading to the creek to cool off and get some relief from the hot afternoon sun. I remember swimming in the Wenatchee River while my dad fished his favorite hole after he was done working for the day. I remember my dad bringing home steelhead for dinner. When my dad was a child, Peshastin-Dryden kids thought nothing of dropping a line in after school and coming home with a few trout. Steelhead, our state fish, were woven into the fabric of life.



Wenatchee River Steelhead. Photo provided by Russ Ricketts

That was about 30 years ago. There has not been a catch and kill season for wild steelhead in over 20 years on that same stretch of river and the same thing is true for salmon. Despite all odds, Peshastin Creek remains the most productive steelhead drainage in the Wenatchee River basin for these ESA-listed fish. Over the decades fewer and fewer salmon and steelhead are returning facing difficult odds downstream and at sea. But the creek provides critical habitat for spawning if they return in greater numbers in years to come.

My 7-year-old daughter will likely never experience catching a steelhead. She river snorkels in the hopes of seeing fish but the river is often devoid of them. It's a good day if she gets the opportunity to see one salmon, steelhead or bull trout in a long stretch of empty river.

It's not too late to make the hard choices to save these species that define us, but time is running out. Many of our streams, such as Nason Creek and Scotty Creek, have been closed to fishing because this habitat has been deemed critical to critically endangered salmon and steelhead. Because this habitat is so necessary for the continuation of these species it is now time to take the step to bring regulations in step with neighboring states and stop the damaging practice of suction dredging where endangered salmonids live.

Peshastin Creek was the site of extensive mining operations generations ago, part of a negative legacy for salmon and steelhead. Today the practice of motorized suction dredge mining kicks up the mercury from these mines and mills that resides deep in the stream bed. Suction dredging also destroys delicate riparian shoreline habitat and disturbs the stratification of gravel layers that are critical to successful spawning.

I have respect for those that provide for their family through the hard work that it takes to provide for one's family by living off the land but we are at a tipping point where some areas are far too critical for the survival of these species for suction dredging to continue.

I invite you to support the passage of SB 6149/HB 1261 to protect areas most important to ESA-listed salmon, steelhead, and other native fish by prohibiting motorized mining in Critical Habitat for these endangered fish. This decision has already been enacted in Idaho, Oregon and California and is pursuant to state water quality laws and the Clean Water Act. The legislation does not ban the practice everywhere, only in areas that are the most important to salmon and steelhead recovery. Join me in writing your state legislators in support of the passage of SB 6149/HB 1261 to support a future with greater abundance of salmon and steelhead for all Washingtonians.

Leah Hemberry is a third-generation resident of Chelan County and the Wenatchee Valley where she grew up on the pear orchard owned by her family. She serves as a fellow for the Native Fish Society.



Leah Hemberry