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Contacts: Gary Graham Hughes, Executive Director, EPIC, 707-822-7711
Pete Frost, Attorney, Western Environmental Law Center, 541-359-3238

Historic Agreement Reforms Trinity River Fish Hatchery

(EUREKA, Ca) – Today a federal court approved the settlement agreement in a lawsuit challenging operations at the Trinity River Fish Hatchery. The agreement between EPIC, state agencies and Tribes allows the hatchery to continue to operate, but with needed reforms to restore imperiled wild coho salmon.

The suit alleged that the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Bureau) operated the hatchery illegally because it lacked an approved plan from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The suit also alleged that the millions of hatchery fish released into the Trinity harm threatened wild salmon runs.

"This settlement shows the commitment of a broad array of stakeholders in the Trinity basin to insure that hatchery operations support recovery of wild salmon," said Gary Graham Hughes, executive director at EPIC. "There is still a long road to travel," said Hughes, "yet this agreement is an historic moment in the process of bringing back our wild salmon."

Represented by the Western Environmental Law Center (WELC) in Eugene, Oregon, EPIC filed suit last year to curb the number of hatchery fish released into the Trinity, alleging that they harm naturally producing coho salmon, listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) as threatened with extinction. On the eve of a motion to the court, the parties – EPIC, CDFW, the Bureau, and the Hoopa Valley and Yurok Tribes – reached agreement that the hatchery could continue to operate, but in 2015 would release fewer hatchery-bred coho salmon and steelhead trout, and release the trout later in the season, so they do not prey on young coho. The agreement also requires the Bureau to submit to NMFS a new plan for hatchery operations by May 31, 2014.

“After decades of saturating the Trinity with hatchery fish, this agreement is a first step toward recovering wild coho runs that are so important in the system,” said Pete Frost, attorney for EPIC.

Principle amongst the terms of the settlement agreement is that the Bureau will consult with NMFS to develop in a timely manner a long-overdue Hatchery Genetic Management Plan (HGMP), which the agency must complete as a requirement of fish hatchery management under the ESA. Genetic considerations are of great importance in fish hatchery management. Hatchery coho salmon harm wild coho salmon when the two populations interbreed. Hatchery coho salmon alter the genetic composition, phenotypic traits, and behavior of wild coho salmon. Genetic introgression—the transfer of genetics from stray hatchery fish to wild populations—lowers the fitness and genetic variability of wild coho salmon populations, decreasing

productivity and abundance. The release of hatchery-raised Chinook and coho salmon and steelhead trout can also have harmful ecological effects on wild coho salmon and their habitat. Hatchery fish prey on wild coho salmon. Hatchery fish can introduce and transmit disease to wild coho salmon. Hatchery fish compete with wild coho salmon for food and spawning and rearing habitat. These ecological effects decrease the fitness and abundance of listed wild coho salmon.

To address these impacts the settlement agreement requires the timely development of the HGMP, and also includes terms that address the timing and number of the release of hatchery coho salmon and hatchery steelhead trout in order to best manage the resultant ecological interactions between hatchery and wild fish in a manner that promotes the recovery of wild Coho salmon.

Background on the Trinity River Fish Hatchery

The Trinity River flows north-northwest 165 miles from the California Coast Range Mountains to its confluence with the Klamath River at Weitchpec, approximately 20 miles from the Pacific Ocean. The South Fork Trinity River, which enters the mainstem Trinity River below any impoundments, is the one of the longest undammed stretches of river in California. Before reaching its confluence with the South Fork, the mainstem Trinity River flows into Trinity Lake, an impoundment created by the Trinity Dam, which stores water for the Central Valley Project. Seven miles downstream of the Trinity Dam is Lewiston Lake, an impoundment created by the Lewiston Dam, where stored water is diverted into the Sacramento River basin.

The Trinity hatchery is located at river mile 110 immediately downstream of the Lewiston Dam. It was built to mitigate for the loss of salmon and steelhead habitat due to the construction of the Trinity and Lewiston dams and the operation of the Central Valley Project. The Bureau funds the hatchery and CDFW runs it.

The Trinity River provides habitat for wild coho salmon. Wild coho salmon in the Trinity River and its tributaries are part of the Southern Oregon/Northern California Coast (SONCC) evolutionarily significant unit (ESU) and listed as threatened with extinction under the ESA. Critical habitat for the SONCC coho ESU includes all accessible reaches of the Klamath River and the Trinity River and the tributaries to each.

Recently, the California Fish Hatchery Review Project completed a [comprehensive statewide review of fish hatcheries](#) and found major problems in current operations throughout the state of California. The leading scientific experts in this project recommended many important changes, of which several have been incorporated into the settlement regarding the Trinity River fish hatchery.

The consultation process for the HGMP for the Trinity fish hatchery under the ESA will result in hatchery operations that promote restoring genetic viability of wild fish. This will further advance natural recovery of native fish species to their historical abundance. EPIC and WELC will continue to be engaged on crucial water and endangered species management issues on the Trinity, Mad, and Klamath Rivers, as well as other rivers in our bioregion.