

Will Legal Weed Help Save Trout and Salmon?

By Sam Davidson

LAST NOVEMBER, California voters passed Proposition 64, a ballot measure that legalized recreational use of marijuana. This outcome was not a big surprise — in 1996, California became the first state in the nation to legalize marijuana use for medical purposes.

For decades, unregulated marijuana cultivation has dried up or caused serious degradation to vital habitat for salmon, steelhead, and trout in California, particularly in small coastal watersheds. With most runs of native salmon and steelhead in this state seriously at risk, it is well past time for us to begin to address this problem.

For that reason, angler conservation groups such as Trout Unlimited and California Trout have worked over the past several years to help shape the effects of Prop 64 or similar legislative action. TU and CalTrout worked with other organizations such as The Nature Conservancy on language in the measure

prioritizing restoration of past damage, improving stewardship of wildlife areas and state parks, and enforcing environmental laws statewide. Their collective efforts paid off in some of the fine print of Prop 64.

An important element of this measure is its provision of funding to repair environmental damage associated with the illegal cultivation of marijuana, and to protect California's habitats, water supply, and landscapes in the future. Specifically, Prop 64 allocates significant funding to restoring watersheds and habitats that have been damaged by marijuana cultivation, improving stewardship and operation of state parks and wildlife areas to prevent future damage from marijuana cultivation, and enforcing environmental laws affecting fish and wildlife habitat throughout the state.

Funding for these priorities will come from a tax on the sale and cultivation of marijuana, with 20 percent of that revenue dedicated to an Environmental Restoration and Protection Account.

Proposition 64 also contains restrictions on pesticide use, as well as funding to enforce regulations on water diversions that have harmful impacts on in-stream flows and wildlife. It requires licensees under the new regulatory structure to prove that they are in compliance with a number of environmental laws and regulations, including lake or streambed alteration permits and agreements, rules that protect endangered species and the water rights of other landowners, and the Clean Water Act.

All good outcomes, no doubt, in terms of benefits for cold-water fish and coastal watersheds. But since we are talking about weed here, the engagement of groups such as TU and CalTrout in this issue has not been without controversy.

TU's California director, Brian Johnson, said, "TU's in-

volvement in this issue has generated some strong feelings, with some anglers thinking we're demonizing a harmless substance and others reminding us that marijuana remains illegal under federal law and has uncertain long-term effects on human physiology and behavior."

Neither TU nor CalTrout have taken a position on whether or not marijuana use should be legalized for any purpose. What

they *have* taken a position on is the impacts of illegal and unregulated cultivation of marijuana on salmon, steelhead, and trout.

TU's Johnson said, "Legal or otherwise, marijuana cultivation has been devastating many of our best salmon and steelhead waters, especially on the North Coast. We cannot simply turn a blind eye to its impacts if we want to save these fish. So we have tried to make sure that as California moves to deal with this issue, there will be policy and funding for habitat restoration and enforcement of water quality and water-rights laws."

Curtis Knight, executive director of CalTrout, said he is hopeful that Prop 64 will provide meaningful and relatively quick benefits for salmon, steelhead, and trout in California. "We worked hard to make sure the State deals with the legacy of environmental damage associated with growing weed," he said. "We will be watching closely how the State implements this measure and stand ready to take further action if the impacts of marijuana cultivation continue to degrade prized fisheries such as the Eel, Mattole, and Trinity Rivers."

These are highly uncertain times for cold-water fish in California. Our native trout, salmon, and steelhead have been decimated in many waters by an apocalyptic combination of dams, drought, the warming climate, and overcommitment of water resources. What is the angler-conservationist to do, besides despair?

The work that CalTrout and TU do offers an answer. Take a pragmatic approach — get involved with local projects and place-based campaigns that deliver results (even if incremental) that will help protect and restore our dwindling salmon and steelhead runs and our diverse trout waters. In addition, pay attention to important issues. TU and CalTrout, in the bigger picture, focus on creating legal agreements and improving policies and regulations that will sustain and scale up the conservation gains we collectively make on the ground. Support these efforts by joining them.

Rarely is conservation work accomplished without some controversy. Whatever your opinion on marijuana policy, Prop 64's benefits for California streams, salmon, and steelhead are significant. It's our responsibility now as anglers to ensure the State follows through.



STATE PERSONNEL ERADICATE A MARIJUANA GROW.

