Columbia River Fisheries….A New Vision

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Columbia River salmon fisheries are in chaos.

* Fisheries agencies attempt to balance sport and non-Indian commercial gill-net fisheries within tight Endangered Species Act (ESA) constraints.

* Sportsmen are frustrated by reduced fishing seasons, abrupt closures and increased license fees.

* Commercial fishermen are frustrated by mainstem constraints on protected salmon and steelhead, putting harvestable hatchery salmon off limits.

* Environmentalists object to bycatch of protected fish and genetic impacts from too many stray hatchery salmon mixing with wild salmon on spawning grounds.

* Businesses suffer devastating economic losses when the states of Oregon and Washington curtail salmon seasons. Sportfishing supports nearly 31,000 jobs in the Pacific Northwest. Many are directly tied to the Columbia River.

* The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Department proposes to raise sport license fees by 20% in 2009 and the Washington Fish and Wildlife Department will soon follow. But anglers balk at paying more for less fishing. Steep decreases in angling license sales snowball into lost opportunity for everyone.

There is a Better Way

The solution is to move the lower Columbia River commercial gill-net fishery entirely into off-channel, terminal fishing areas called SAFE (for Select Area Fisheries Enhancement). SAFE is an experiment-turned-success. Oregon and Washington could then use the limited main stem ESA impacts to maximize sportfishing opportunity on hatchery fish. Impacts in this context refer to the total mortality on a listed run of fish, including hooking mortality from released fish as well as kept fish.

Terminal fishing in SAFE areas such as Young's Bay, near Astoria, Oregon, has been used for years to supplement the commercial fishery. For example, according to ODFW figures, in 2007

SAFE area fisheries contributed 62% of spring chinook commercial harvest and 26% of fall salmon harvest in the Columbia River. In 2008, the SAFE percentage of commercial harvest is even higher.

Increased hatchery releases and improved survival rates in SAFE areas would ensure stable and profitable commercial fishing while adequately supplying markets. Even better, lower river netters are able to catch salmon in their prime, at top market value fresh from the Ocean. Profitable SAFE fisheries, in turn, would reduce wasted steelhead and cause fewer juvenile sturgeon mortalities.

This change also generates millions of dollars in economic value from sport fishing and tourism to local Columbia River communities from Astoria to Portland and Ilwaco to Vancouver. Expanded sport fishing license sales help stabilize the financial status of the fisheries agencies and their conservation mission.

This strategy holds substantial additional conservation benefits. Sport fishing involves just minor bycatch mortality of non-targeted species such as wild steelhead, sockeye and sturgeon. Because sport fishing removes more hatchery fish for each incidental wild fish handling mortality, the number of stray hatchery fish on the spawning grounds is reduced. Reprogramming more hatchery fish to lower river sites also reduces stray hatchery fish on the spawning grounds. Most of the returning hatchery fish in terminal fishing areas will be caught in the commercial fishery after the fish pass through the sport fishery, further reducing strays.

We know that in a period of changing climate there will be increasing variability in run strengths and many surprises in the future. Managing a sport fishery across a full season allows for better economics with a lighter touch on the resource. It also allows quick response to changed run sizes much more easily than if a front-loaded, intense commercial fishery has already used up a substantial portion of the ESA impacts allocated to the non-Indian fishery. This change improves managers ability to respond to surprises with less dramatic economic and social disruption.

This change can be phased in and mainstem fishing allocations shifted as new, increased salmon production returns to the SAFE areas. This will facilitate an orderly transition that is fair to all parties. This strategy will provide an equitable solution to a very heated and contentious controversy.

A Little History

Before the Endangered Species Act listings and the US v. Oregon allocation agreements with Columbia River treaty tribes, there were ample fall chinook and coho stocks to allow liberal sport and lower Columbia River gill-net fisheries to co-exist. However, several factors have changed.

First, allowable harvest rates have been severely reduced to support ESA rebuilding of salmon/steelhead stocks primarily decimated by habitat loss and hydropower mortality. As a result, lower Columbia River fisheries harvests are limited to well below 10%, with some fisheries, such as spring chinook, limited to just 2% impact on listed fish. When the handling mortality of sport and gill-net fisheries combined reaches 2%, the spring chinook season is over. Sport fishing seasons get shorter each year.

Second, the majority of main stem ESA impacts have been allocated by state and federal agencies to tribal fisheries for ceremonial/subsistence, as well as tribal commercial harvest.

Today, there simply are not enough ESA impacts to allow both stable, dependable sport fisheries and substantial lower Columbia River commercial gill-net fisheries in the mainstem. The frustration is growing at ODFW/WDFW Commission hearings, Columbia River Compact meetings and in both state legislatures.

The Economics

Analyses show that the greatest economic benefit for each harvestable salmon results from sport fishing. For each 10 wild fish caught and released, only one dies from handling in the sport fishery. Some studies have shown the mortality can be as low as 3% when fishing with lures rather than bait.

Large mesh gill-net fisheries have roughly 40% release mortality and 14-18% mortality with smaller mesh gill-nets that capture the fish by tangling the teeth. However, "tooth nets" for salmon-sized fish act as gill-nets for the smaller co-mingled steelhead. Bycatch mortality for juvenile sturgeon and other species is also an ongoing concern.

Today, for every hatchery spring chinook fish caught and kept in the sport fishery, anglers have on average, spent eight days of fishing! Each day of salmon fishing contributes roughly $175.00 into the economy for gas, bait, food, lodging and gear. A commercially caught salmon will usually sell for $30-$150 per fish at the dock, depending on species and season.

The Pacific Northwest is growing rapidly, with projections to double in population by 2040 and quadruple by 2100. Rapid growth and the demand for high quality, Alaska-level salmon sport fishing is sure to intensify conflicts. The states must look to the future and formulate their plans for the next generation of fishermen and true salmon/steelhead recovery.

We can double the sport fishery and provide the same number of salmon to the market (or perhaps more). It's a win/win for both commercial and sport fishermen for the long term.

Hatchery smolt releases can be moved into new and existing SAFE areas in the lower Columbia River to enable commercial fisheries to catch just as many fish as they do now in the mainstem, with far more dependability, less environmental harm, lower harvest costs and higher economic value.

ODFW studies show that moving coho salmon smolts from upriver hatcheries to release points in Young's Bay terminal SAFE area doubles overall survival into Ocean fisheries and quadruples overall harvest benefit, including substantial expansion of the Ocean, Buoy 10 and in-river commercial fisheries. At a time when Ocean coho fisheries are severely restricted, a doubling of hatchery fish survival would benefit every community on the Oregon and Washington Coast and would be an economic boon for lower Columbia River communities.

So Why Are We Stalemated in Controversy?

The Oregon and Washington Commissions share management responsibility for the benefit of citizens while protecting and maintaining these natural resources. They recognize that serious conflict exists, but have been unable or unwilling to take decisive action to break the deadlock. They recently sponsored a "visioning process" involving some stakeholders to guide future decisions. However when this vision was presented, the Oregon Commission refused to include it as an option. Thus, citizens are forced to seek solutions from the legislature. Recently, however, ODF&W staff has suggested a strategy similar to this proposal with respect to spring chinook.

Lower Columbia River commercial gill-net advocates recognize the current value of the terminal area fisheries. However, they cite the crowding problems in the terminal areas and the desire to fish traditional places where their fathers and grandfathers fished. Crowding can be reduced by adding new SAFE areas and deploying part of the fleet on alternate days. Sport anglers support the development of new commercial terminal areas to spread out the harvest opportunity for commercial fishermen.

The reality is that the current conflict will eventually lead to a total elimination of the lower Columbia River gill-net fishery, as it has everywhere else in America. That has been the long-term fate of market hunting and commercial fishing in freshwater.

So, why not just wait until the conflict intensifies to the breaking point, eventually eliminating non-tribal commercial gill-netting? Because inaction sacrifices a valuable opportunity to convert surplus hatchery fish, uncaught in the sport fishery, into market value. We unnecessarily eliminate rural jobs in fishing and processing. We lose the incentive to reprogram hatchery fish into terminal areas with the resulting increase in survival and fisheries contribution. And we suffer far too many hatchery strays mixing with wild fish on the spawning grounds, which will eventually result in environmental lawsuits that could well shut down hatcheries critical to the region's fisheries.

Most of all, we endure years of increased conflict, management gridlock, lost fishing/economic opportunity and severe funding shortfalls in agency budgets resulting in reduced fishery production and poor conservation program quality.

Waiting is not worth it.

We Can Do This… Now!

If you have ever asked, "When are we going to do something about gill-netting and shorter sport fishing seasons?" the answer is now. You need to care enough to call the Governor and state legislators of both states, talk to your fishing buddies about doing the same and write a check to support our selective fishing campaign to **SAFE for Salmon!** PO Box 4, Oregon City, Oregon 97045. SAFE for Salmon is a campaign to effect this change in policy. It is managed by a coalition of sport fishing organizations including: Association of NW Steelheaders, NW Guides and Anglers Association, OR Council of Trout Unlimited, Puget Sound Anglers and Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association. Funds will be used for: economic analysis, lobbying, message development, outreach to sportsmen's groups, working with economic/tourism interests and coordinating with legislative supporters and agencies. For more information, to donate money and/or to volunteer to help please call SAFE for Salmon at 503 631 8859 or toll free 866 315 6742.

Some will just continue to complain and not support this campaign….others will make a difference. **Which are you?**

About the Authors

We've spent a cumulative span of nearly 160 years of managing fisheries and advocating conservation programs. We have watched this conflict intensify and the management agencies suffer from "bunker mentality", sticking doggedly to the status quo when everyone else sees the need for change. This can be done and our economy and conservation will benefit greatly. The Pacific Northwest can become a sport fishing economic engine without the reduction of fish available for the market or commercial fishing jobs.