



PROPOSAL: MORE TERMINAL FISHERIES, LESS MAINSTEM NETS; COMMERCIAL GILL-NETTERS SAY NOT FAIR, FEASIBLE

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A newly devised strategy to move gill-net fisheries off the Columbia River mainstem would bring benefits to all, including the commercial fishing fleet, according to its proponents.

Columbia River commercial fishers don't buy it.

"There isn't a paragraph that can't be refuted," Salmon for All's Hobe Kytr said of "Columbia River Fisheries... A New Vision." Salmon for All includes as members commercial fishermen, sea food processors and economically related businesses and individuals.

The New Vision "white paper" was released recently to launch a new campaign to end gill-netting on the mainstem Columbia. The Safe for Salmon campaign is spearheaded by the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association and joined by such partners as the Oregon Council of Trout Unlimited, Northwest Guides and Anglers Association, Puget Sound Anglers and the Association of Northwest Steelheaders.

The white paper can be found online at: <http://www.nsiafishing.org/index.html>

The white paper authors are Jim Martin, a retired chief of fisheries for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife; Rod Sando, former director the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Idaho Department of Fish and Game; Bill Shake, retired assistant regional director for fisheries for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Don Swartz, retired ODFW fisheries manager. All are volunteer policy and science advisers for NSIA.

They say the solution to never-ending disputes between sport and commercial fishers is to move the lower Columbia River commercial gill-net fishery entirely into off-channel terminal fishing areas called SAFE (for the Select Area Fisheries Enhancement program).

That program's expansion via the reprogramming of upriver hatcheries to provide juvenile fish for final rearing in lower river select area's would provide gill-netters additional fish while incurring minimal mortality of wild fish that are listed under the Endangered Species Act, the white paper says.

That would allow anglers to catch more salmon and steelhead on the mainstem. Increased sport fishing would provide a big boost to local economies, proponents of the strategy say.

The shift in harvest emphasis would also help achieve conservation goals by removing more hatchery fish that could, if left in-river, reproduce with wild salmon and reduce their genetic fitness, the white paper says. Most mainstem fisheries require the release of unmarked salmon and steelhead with the presumption that they were naturally produced. The post-release mortality is much higher for netted fish than it is for those set free by anglers.

The strategy would virtually eliminate bycatch mortality of non-targeted species such as wild steelhead, sockeye and sturgeon.

Martin says that everyone would win if the strategy is executed – anglers, gill-netters, fishery management agencies and protected salmon. The white paper notes that in 2007 SAFE area fisheries accounted for 62 percent of the spring chinook commercial harvest and 26 percent of the fall salmon harvest in the Columbia River.

With an expansion of the off-channel terminal fisheries "they may get more fish than they are getting now," Martin said of the commercial fleet.

He said the does not offer a "pig in the poke," meaning the mainstem would not be cleared of nets until adult fish began returning from any terminal fishery expansion.

"Our vision is not less fish for gill-netters," said Liz Hamilton, NSIA executive director.

While the campaign is urging support for the plan, commercial fishermen are girding for a fight.

"It's not technically feasible and it's not remotely equitable," Kytr says. There is not enough space in the four select areas now being used for the full fleet to operate and, during the development of the SAFE program, other areas were investigated and found unsuitable, he said.

A mainstem net ban would also deny the fleet the opportunity to pursue more prized and valuable upriver stocks such as spring chinook. Kytr said conditions in the lower river are not suitable to rear upriver stocks and it is unlikely they would return to net pen sites as adults.

Under the SAFE program hatchery raised fish get their final rearing in select area net pens so they zero in on the pens when they return.

"Fishermen and consumers would no longer have access to those high quality stocks," he said. Gill-netters' access to sturgeon would also be limited if they were confined to select areas. As it is now, the fleet gets 20 percent of the allowable harvest – 8,000 sturgeon. The fishers normally catch only about 1,000 of that total in the select areas, Kytr said.

"SAFE is a good program but it was intended to supplement fishing in the mainstem, not replace it."

The states of Oregon and Washington, which co-manage the mainstem fisheries, have long struggled find the appropriate sharing of harvest between sport and commercial fisheries. That management includes the allocation of allowable "impacts" on the 13 listed Columbia River basin salmon and steelhead stocks.

The SAFE program was officially created in 1993 as a 10-year comprehensive program to investigate the feasibility of terminal fisheries in Youngs Bay near Astoria, Ore., and other sites that are off the lower Columbia's mainstem in Oregon and Washington where few of the listed fish wander. Terminal fisheries in Youngs Bay date back to the early 1960s.

In the program, hatchery spring chinook, coho and fall chinook are reared in on-site net pens for a time before they are released. When those juveniles return from the ocean as adults, they have homed in on the release sites and are harvested at a higher rate than any other Columbia Basin stock by commercial and sport fishers. The goal is to harvest 100 percent of the return and thus eliminate the possibility that straying hatchery fish could spawn with wild fish and potentially diminish their hardiness.

Few upriver fish swim through the select areas, which are off the mainstem migration path.

"We've been struggling over the years to decide who gets what," said Curt Melcher, ODFW deputy director. All sorts of strategies have been tried, the latest being the formation of the Columbia River Fish Working Group with fish and wildlife commissioners as voting members and state agency officials and fishing industry representatives as non-voting members. Its first charge is to recommend a new plan for apportioning harvest opportunities for spring and summer chinook salmon between sport and commercial fisheries in the lower Columbia River.

At the working group's initial meeting in mid-September the state of Oregon offered a "strawman" proposal that includes elements similar to those in the NSIA strategy.

Melcher said the intent is to "make the pot bigger," allow a larger harvest of hatchery fish within the same ESA impact limits. For the spring season non-tribal fishers can harvest up to 2 percent of the upriver spring chinook salmon run, which includes listed Upper Columbia spring and Snake River spring/summer stocks. Anglers and the commercial fleet split the allocation with sport fishers, generally, getting a larger share.

The Oregon plan involves moving 1 million ODFW-produced spring chinook smolts from, most likely, the Willamette River to lower Columbia select areas. In the longer term the production lost to Willamette basin would be replaced, Melcher said.

"That would translate to more fish for the commercial fishing industry," Melcher said. The strawman would shift more of the commercial fishing time to the select areas but not totally end gill-netting on the mainstem. It only addresses the spring season and spring chinook.

If implemented next spring, the first returns would be expected two or three years later. In the interim, Oregon wants to institute a larger ESA impact buffer early in the season. Only 40 percent of the allowable impacts, based on the preseason run-size forecast, could be incurred before an updated forecast is developed. That typically happens at the point fishery officials believe half of the run has passed Bonneville Dam, which is 146 miles upstream from the river mouth.

The two states have ongoing discussions about the proposal and it will be an agenda item when the working group meets next week.

Both Melcher and Guy Norman, director of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's southwest region, believe an expansion of lower river terminal fisheries is possible.

"There's the potential to rear more fish" if funding is available and if appropriate new sites can be found," Norman said. Previously explored sites could be given a more thorough look, he said.

Tradeoffs would have to be considered. Some of the previously rejected sites have a relatively high incidence of listed fish so the potential mortality there would have to be compared to the cost of catching the same number of hatchery fish in the mainstem. In other cases water conditions at certain sites may have not been suitable for the particular salmon stock being considered at the time but another stock might work, Norman said.

He said the states are legally obligated to provide fishing opportunity for both anglers and commercial fishers within conservation constraints.

The NSIA-led campaign is asking supporters to contact their legislators.

"We want legislative language, a law, that says nets on the mainstem are permanently eliminated," Martin said.

Norman said it is not within the authority of the agencies or state fish and wildlife commissions to ban gear such as gill-nets. The legislatures can.

Hamilton says the SAFE for Salmon plan is the best approach for solving the long-running rancor between the two fishing interests.

"Frankly, most sport fishermen want to just ban nets" entirely, she said.

Commercial fishermen don't see any silver lining. Kytr said the strategy is a first step toward eliminating commercial fishing in the river and compared it to past government treatment of Native Americans.

"The first thing you do is remove them. The next step is to starve them out," he said.