

Washington to delay Columbia spring chinook season setting

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The six-week-old standoff between Washington and Oregon over the sport-commercial sharing of Columbia River spring chinook salmon got even thornier on Wednesday.

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission directed state Department of Fish and Wildlife officials to not adopt sport or gillnet spring salmon seasons when they meet today with Oregon at the Columbia River Compact session in Oregon City.

The two states, meeting as the Compact, will adopt tribal fisheries upstream of Bonneville Dam, and will accept testimony from the public about how potential sport seasons could be structured.

It will be the first time in more than 30 years that starting dates for the sport and gillnet fisheries were not set by the Compact in late January or early February.

Phil Anderson, interim director of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, said Columbia River fishing guides in particular need to know the spring chinook season structure so they can take reservations at the annual Pacific Northwest Sportsmen's Show, which begins Wednesday at the Expo Center in Portland.

Washington commission members agreed Wednesday that they want resolution of the differences with the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission before setting fishing seasons.

At the core of the dispute is a disagreement on how the catch of Columbia River spring chinook should be split between sport fishermen and gillnetters.

Columbia River spring chinook are among the finest salmon in the world and the sport and commercial sides have fought bitterly over sharing for decades.

Three members of the Washington commission and three from Oregon met three times last fall as the Columbia River Fish Working Group to craft a five-year catch-sharing agreement. That group agreed on a 65 percent sport-35 commercial base sharing allocation, with some variations depending on the relative strengths of the spring salmon runs in the upper Columbia and Willamette rivers.

Washington's commission adopted the 65-35 split as policy, But four members of the seven-member Oregon commission voted to change the base to 55 percent sport and 45 percent commercial, then later modified it to 60 percent sport-40 percent commercial.

The highest priority of the Columbia River Fish Working Group was a 45-day sport season in March and April.

"My concern is if over a three- to five-year period that the recreational fishing group can get the number of days that they require, based on 55-45," said Conrad Mahnken, a Washington commission member from Bainbridge Island. "I think 65-35 is much closer to what is needed to get that fishery's objective met."

Washington commission member Jerry Gutzwiler of Wenatchee said the base-sharing allocation "is the big deal.

"It's really fundamental to the way the rest of this thing runs," he added.

Gutzwiler also said Oregon's change from the working group recommendation smacks of a back-room

decision.

"Ethically, it kind of stinks," he said.

Washington commission member Gary Douvia of Kettle Falls said 11 of the commission members from the two states agree on 65-35 sharing, while four Oregon commissioners want 55-45.

Washington commission member George Orr of Spokane said the difference between the two states is about 2,500 spring chinook.

"We will pay a hell of a price for 2,500 fish if this thing breaks down," Orr said.

The Compact meets at 10 a.m. today at the Clackamas County Historical Society, 211 Tumwater Drive, Oregon City. Comments will be taken on potential sport seasons in the lower Columbia.

Cindy LeFleur, Columbia River policy coordinator for Washington, mentioned a possible season of sport fishing daily through mid-March throughout the lower Columbia, followed by three to four days a week of fishing through April 18 downstream of the Willamette River and four days a week through April 22 between the Willamette and Bonneville Dam.