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Fish plan could clear the waters

Fishery proposal seeks win-win situation for commercial and sport-fishers

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Backers of a new proposal to expand off-channel salmon fisheries say their plan is a win-win for sport and commercial fishers, two groups that have long been at loggerheads over seasons on the Lower Columbia River.

But gillnetters say the proposal is really a power grab by the sport-fishing industry and part of a larger plot to put commercial boats out of business.

The "SAFE for Salmon" plan would beef up the off-channel net-pen fisheries for gillnetters and give sport-fishers more access to fish in the main-stem Columbia.

A gillnetter reels in his net Thursday east of the Old Youngs Bay Bridge on Youngs River. Under the proposed "SAFE for Salmon" plan, sport-fishers would be allowed greater access to fish in the main-stem of the Columbia River while gillnetters would see increased fish production at net pens, such as the one on Youngs River, in exchange for fishing off of the main-stem Columbia.

ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian

It would bump commercial gillnetters off the main-stem and, to compensate, increase fish production at net pens near the mouth of the Columbia, such as the ones at Youngs Bay and Tongue Point. Those areas are called Select Areas for Fisheries Enhancement, or SAFE.

With the nets off the main-stem, sport fishers would have a larger allocation of the wild fish impacts needed to access hatchery stocks, and their seasons would double.

Jim Martin, a retired fisheries chief for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, who co-authored the "SAFE for Salmon" plan with three other retired fisheries managers, said the plan could end the stalemate in Columbia River fisheries management.



Within a matter of minutes, 55,000 coho salmon smolts are flushed from a tanker truck, through a hose and into a net pen at the Astoria Yacht Club.

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"We think it's not only pragmatic, but it's a win-win," said Martin.

If adopted, the plan would mark a historic change in fishery management on the river. But so far, it's just an idea that could come up in a new process that could determine next year's spring and summer Chinook allocations.

This summer, Oregon and Washington tapped sport and commercial fishing representatives and several fish and wildlife commissioners from each state to form the Columbia River Fish Working Group. The new group replaces a stakeholder group that crumbled earlier this year when sport-fishing industry representatives backed away from negotiations about salmon seasons. The group was meeting today in Portland.

The group includes Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commissioner Jon Englund of Astoria, along with two other Oregon commissioners, three Washington commissioners, and stakeholders from salmon fishing industries in both states.

The Oregon and Washington fish and wildlife commissions decide every two years how to split a total allowance of fishery impacts to threatened and endangered species between sport and commercial fishers. Both sport and commercial fisheries impact wild fish while targeting hatchery stocks.



A truck, loaded with 55,000 coho salmon shipped from Oxbow Fish Hatchery, deposits the smolts in net pens on Youngs River next to the Astoria Yacht Club. Photo by Alex Pajunas - The Daily Astorian

But the two sides never agree on how the state should split the allowance of impacts, which, in effect, determines how many fish each group can catch. The battles bruised both industries, and each suffers from the unpredictable seasons and cutbacks in total catch allowances under the current management scheme.

Martin said if sport and commercial groups can't agree on a new management plan, eventually, the gillnetters will be banned from the main-stem anyway.

"There are not enough impacts," he said. "We've got to modernize this fishery and do it now. We think our proposal will match up better than the status quo or any other proposals eliminating gillnetting altogether."

His plan calls for a gradual move from the current scheme to one with gillnetters confined to SAFE areas.

A separate plan to ban gillnets from the Columbia River is expected to be proposed to the state Legislature during the next session.

The result of the SAFE plan, he said, would be a long-term solution to fishing problems, more fish for sport and commercial boats, fewer arguments over allocation, and an added bonus for conservation.

All salmon fisheries in Astoria - sport and commercial - would see a windfall from the plan, he said.

But Astoria resident Bruce Buckmaster, former owner of the BioOregon plant in Hammond that produces feed for fish, and a member of the commercial fishing group Salmon For All, said the plan is unfunded and currently without a price tag.

Besides that, he said, it's asking gillnetters to give up their long-standing rights to fish in the Columbia River without an equivalent sacrifice from sport-fishers.

"The way I remember win-win is both sides gain more than they lose," he said. "With this plan, it's more like 'I will give up a little of what I've won for most of what you have.'"



Dan Dunn, of Clatsop County Fisheries, seals up a pair of net pens at the Astoria Yacht Club after they were filled with coho salmon smolts. The fish will be released into the Youngs River in seven months. Photo by Alex Pajunas - The Daily Astorian

The key to the "SAFE for Salmon" plan is the excess hatchery fish returning to Columbia River tributaries. Hatcheries are required to release a certain number of fish, but if they're not all caught upon their return from the ocean, the strays can breed with wild fish and threaten the existence of already fragile species.

Proponents of the SAFE plan advocate reprogramming those excess fish to return to off-channel terminal fisheries at the mouth of the Columbia or in Willapa Bay instead of the upriver hatcheries.

When those fish are returning from the ocean, sport-fishers would get the first opportunity to catch them, but then commercial boats would clean up as they entered the off-channel areas. The river's fisheries would be "front-loaded," leaving fewer surprises for managers as salmon make their way upriver.

Though the plan isn't being considered by the state yet, it has re-ignited age-old arguments from both sport and commercial groups.

Sport-fishers claim their industry has a greater economic benefit to the region with fewer environmental impacts, commercial fishing groups say the true impacts of sport-fishing haven't been closely examined and commercial boats provide a valuable service in offering salmon to those who cannot catch it themselves.

Commercials also argue the state needs to cap the number of licenses it issues to fishing guides, a sector of commercial sport-fishing that is growing unchecked. And, they say, the SAFE areas are crowded during open fishing seasons, and there doesn't seem to be much room for expansion.

The SAFE plan calls for staggered fishery openers where not all gillnetters would fish on the same days.

But Buckmaster said if there is a way to increase the number of fish in SAFE areas, those fish could still increase the catch allowances for everyone without forcing gillnetters to give up their rights to fish in the channel.

"Once you give something up you'll never get it back," he said. "Maybe we would catch less in the main-stem as we were catching more in SAFE areas - not as a design to get us off the main-stem but really as a design to create more harvest, more abundance."

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