

## Showing in Salem helps leaders focus on salmon solution

Posted by [klagner](#) March 28, 2009 19:20PM

SALEM - It was, remarked one sergeant at arms, the biggest crowd yet in this legislative session.

They filled two hearing rooms, spilled out into the lobby to watch television monitors, nearly blocked the restrooms and even migrated through the rotunda and up the marble staircase, huddling outside legislative chambers to find the Capitol building's last working screen.

Thursday afternoon's first public airing of this session's array of measures to alter the way we harvest salmon drew 300 Oregonians (plus or minus, I didn't get an accurate count) into the already-humming state Capitol building.

They came even though none had a chance to speak to Rep. Tobias Read's (D-Portland) House Committee on Sustainability and Economic Development. They came to listen, to wear hats, buttons and pins.

They came to visit their legislators; to say in person what they felt every time they signed a form letter, or scribbled their deepest feelings onto lined yellow legal paper, or got someone to type the message for them.

They came to listen intently; to frown at noisy lobbyists working other issues a few feet away; to glare at cell phones that went off instead of turned off; to talk with each other.

And to feel good about a day well spent.

Oregon's fishermen and women -- sport and commercial -- are on point. Commercial fishermen are wary; the sport salmon community wants change -- change that on Thursday afternoon got ever so closer to a long-distant horizon.

Anger, frustration and mumbling greeted Sen. Betsy Johnson's (D-Scappoose) suggestion to defer the gill-net and harvest issues to an off-season legislative committee for "collaboration."

Collaboration is needed, all right.

But it can't wait.

The sportfishing industry is no longer recession proof, said B.G. Eilertson, a merchandise manager for Joe's Sports Outdoor & More. Eilertson pleaded with the committee to help stop the hemorrhaging in the sport fishing industry. Staggering losses are already into the tens of millions dollars.

It may be too late for Eilertson's own employer, dealing with bankruptcy brought on in part by unpredictable, sometimes quixotic and abruptly abbreviated sport fishing seasons that gut as much as a third of Joe's overall spring business.

Oregon's once-vibrant boat-building industry has seen one giant shut down its stores and another cut its work force by nearly two thirds, teetering on the brink.

No, people haven't stopped fishing. But they've been cut out of a full fishing season during the region's most lucrative fishery. Sales of bait, lures, boats and other equipment have dropped so low the industry has suffered massive layoffs, closures and bankruptcies well beyond Joe's. And all this on the verge of one of the highest predicted spring chinook runs in post-dam history on the Columbia.

It doesn't have to be this way.

"How many more businesses need to go away and jobs be lost before we realize that this situation demands immediate attention?" Eilertson said. "We're at a crisis level right now."

The heartfelt plea was one of several articulate and carefully prepared statements made for and against three separate bills designed to change harvest schemes on the lower Columbia River:

HB 2781 -- Would end all non-tribal gill-netting. Sen. Fred Girod (R-Lyons), the bill's chief proponent, said the measure would spur commercial netters to find other ways to catch hatchery fish without harming wild fish and said the gill-netting era is past. "This is a way to save commercial fishing, not destroy it," Girod said.

HB 2579 -- Would legalize the use of seines and traps on the lower Columbia. Currently, only gill-nets are allowed to take salmon commercially in the lower river. The bill comes from a new and powerful player in the region, the 9,000-member Coastal Conservation Association (CCA), which also wants to end gill-netting but believes it will take more than one legislative session to pull off.

HB 2734 -- The SAFE for Salmon proposal, which would allow gill-nets, but move them off the mainstem and into off-channel commercial fishing zones like those that currently account for a large percentage of the lower Columbia's commercial catch. SAFE would shift significant hatchery production into those zones to enrich netters and also thus reduce both the wasted surplus of returning hatchery adults and hatchery straying onto wild spawning beds.

Curiously enough, a panel of respected fishery scientists called the Hatchery Scientific Review Group ([www.hatcheryreform.us](http://www.hatcheryreform.us)) testified Thursday in support of most arguments made in favor of both the CCA and SAFE for Salmon proposals. Their findings were made public Friday in Portland before several members of the region's congressional delegation.

Tribal officials are watching the process very carefully and pointedly warned the legislature Thursday they could return to court if any changes occur in downriver fishing that would alter their catches above Bonneville Dam.

Gill-netters told the committee none of the bills would work; that the system is fine the way it is, with enough salmon to go around.

They reserved most of their criticism for the SAFE for Salmon proposal, and rightfully so. It offers the best, most lasting and speediest solution to the vexing quagmire.

In fact, Washington and Oregon are already quietly shifting some hatchery production to lower river terminal zones, most of them in Washington. As many as three million hatchery smolts may be on the drawing board.

Encouraged by both the turnout and tone of Thursday's session and the Friday announcement of the hatchery review report -- which essentially echoes the efforts of both HB 2579 and 2734 -- representatives of both the CCA and SAFE for Salmon met informally in a late Friday telephone conference call.

Negotiations have begun to reach a compromise and, said Jack Smith of the CCA, "Get something everyone can live with passed in this session.

"There is a lot of momentum."

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## Comments

### TimeToFish says...

Well put Mr. Monroe! Addressing Columbia River sport and commercial salmon seasons is long overdue and I'm thankful the Oregon Legislature has taken the first steps in fixing this decades old problem.

The Columbia River from Astoria to Bonneville Dam could be an important tourist destination for anglers around the world. Oregon and Washington have effectively exported this business to Alaska and Canada where they enjoy the bounty of open seasons and management policies that support sport and commercial fishing interests.

With golf courses, attractions, wineries, restaurants, parks, hotels, sight seeing and retail benefits-a-plenty the Columbia could be an 8 month draw to anglers from every corner of the globe.

Like Oregon's Beach Bill and Bottle Bill moving the needle on this issue will require courageous leadership, vision and consensus. The long term benefits will be enormous. Ending the conflict will finally allow sport and commercial interests, along with conservation groups and industries to work in harmony to recover fish, create new fisheries, fund the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and set a course to a much more productive and brighter future for N.W. salmon and salmon fishing.

My thanks to the Oregon Legislature for taking this issue on and to the Oregonian for continuing to cover this issue. It's been in the closet too long and demands a full airing so it can finally be solved.

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