

Spring salmon allocation battle: Oregon's turn

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The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission will step up to the plate tomorrow and take another shot at trying to keep the peace between commercial and sport fishers on the lower Columbia River.

The sportfishing industry is hemorrhaging. Hundreds of jobs have been lost in the boat-building industry alone. Few, if any, displayers even met their costs at the recent Portland Boat Show. Sales are down in sporting goods stores. The tackle industry is reeling...literally and figuratively.

It's time for the Fish and Wildlife Commission to see the carnage and take the compromise Washington offered last Friday.

Briefly: The states set up a joint committee last year to resolve the bitter allocation issues between the two groups. The committee developed a sharing plan weighted to the more economically valuable sportfishing industry.

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission approved the compromise, but four Oregon commissioners (and thus a majority of the seven-member panel) balked and demanded a bigger share for commercial gill-nets.

Washington met again last Friday and stuck with their allocation percentages, but compromised a little by suggesting more spring salmon be available to the nets in the early part of the season, when the fish are more valuable.

Next up is tomorrow's Oregon meeting, by telephone conference call.

There will be no public testimony, but the call will be aired on speakers in several locations.

State biologists are scheduled to meet in Oregon City next Friday to set seasons, but that date could be postponed a little since the bulk of the fish are a month or two away. Gotta get done soon, though, since anglers already are out and about under angling rules that allow two springers a day until a more restrictive season is set.

Oregon commissioners made their point, but now need to put away their egos and pay closer attention to the ramifications.

This is serious stuff.

Normally, salmon management is more about conservation than the economy. But given there are no biological issues involved and wild-fish escapements are likely ensured, this one is all about the economy.

Few, if any, gill-net jobs are at risk. Hundreds and perhaps a thousand or more in the sportfishing industry are on the block. Further, and perhaps more important, anglers themselves need to remain involved in these fisheries. The fewer their numbers, the less money is collected to fund fish management -- restoration, habitat, etc.

This is no time to lose the region's signature fishery at the net.

(More about Friday's decision and the shifting sands in Sunday's column)

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