

## Legislature may move Columbia gill-netters away from wild fish

Posted by [slearn](#) February 17, 2009 11:22AM



The OregonianMark Ihander uses a gill net to fish for salmon in the Columbia River near Astoria in 2002.

The battle between sportfishermen and commercial gill-netters has raged for decades on the Columbia River, with the confrontation growing more poisonous as the Endangered Species Act steadily squeezes the number of salmon and steelhead available.

Now a coalition built largely around angling groups thinks it has come up with a middle-ground solution: Bumping Oregon's only non-tribal gill-netters into the Columbia's side channels and bays, but stocking those fishing grounds with increased numbers of hatchery fish.

That approach would keep the gill-netters in business, the coalition says, as much as double the sportfish catch on the main stem of the Lower Columbia River, and reduce capture of endangered wild fish by the less-selective gill nets.

The coalition, [SAFE for Salmon](#), unveiled its proposal today, along with bills in the Legislature designed to require the gill-netting shift.

The legislative action follows a long string of bills and ballot initiatives in Oregon and Washington that unsuccessfully attempted to restrict non-tribal gill-netting, forcing the gill-netters to fight to survive in what is still Oregon's top salmon fishing grounds.

"We think (the gill-netters) will be better off under this plan," said Jim Martin, a former head of the Oregon's fisheries division and lead author of

the SAFE for Salmon approach. "And their position will be more politically sustainable."

But the gill-netters, including many who can trace their fishing roots back to when salmon canneries thrived in the 1800s, are deeply suspicious. The gill-net proposal comes as the two sides are squabbling over this year's allocation of spring chinook.

Gill-netters are skeptical that the side channels and bays can produce enough salmon to keep them whole and maintain crucial jobs for coastal towns, said Steve Fick, and owner of Fishhawk Fisheries, which operates fish processing plants in Astoria and Alaska. They also wonder why the sportfishing groups didn't seek their input from the beginning if the plan is truly a compromise.

"They're promoting this as a win-win, but they have not approached the people this most severely affects," said Fick, a board member of [Salmon for All](#), a gill-netter advocacy group. "That is a big red flag for us."

Native American tribes -- the third big fishing group on the Columbia -- also have concerns about the proposal, said Charles Hudson, spokesman for the [Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission](#).

It could boost the total take of hatchery fish in the Lower Columbia -- between the river's mouth and Bonneville Dam -- reducing the population for tribal fishermen upstream of Bonneville.

That's a particular concern in the fast, furious fishery for spring chinook. The springers are lucrative for both tribal and non-tribal fishermen, Hudson said, and are an important ceremonial fish for the tribes.

"A state's fish are a state's business, but it's our view that there are too many risks and uncertainties" in the SAFE for Salmon proposal, Hudson said. "We have not blessed it and will not."

Among the groups backing the SAFE for Salmon proposal: the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association, the Association of Northwest Steelheaders, the Oregon Council of Trout Unlimited and Oregon Wild, an environmental group. Martin is one of four retired fisheries managers who authored the plan.

Martin says he understands the mistrust and the concerns. But SAFE for Salmon did present the proposal to gill-netting groups, he said. And almost two-thirds of the gill-netters' spring chinook catch is already occurring in Select Area Fisheries Enhancement zones or SAFE areas, Martin said, including Youngs Bay by Astoria.

Scheduling gill-netters to fish in shifts, say on even or odd dates, and expanding SAFE areas where needed can ensure that gill-netters don't lose out, he said. At the same time, expanding sportfishing would generate economic dividends for Oregon by boosting spending on equipment and travel.

The proposal could better keep hatchery fish out of wild fish spawning grounds, Martin said. And it could break a longstanding logjam over fishing allocations on the Columbia: "The acrimony and nastiness of this controversy we have today tends to lock people into their positions."

Gill-netters have made improvements in recent years and argue that the wild fish mortality gap between gill-netting and sportfishing has

dramatically narrowed. SAFE for Salmon says the smaller "tangle nets" that gill-netters have employed in recent years still kill up to 14 percent to 18 percent of the wild fish caught and released, versus 3 percent to 10 percent in sportfishing.

There are about 500 permits issued for non-tribal gill-netting on the Columbia, Fick said, but typically about 150 boats actively fishing.

The two companion bills containing the SAFE for Salmon proposal -- Senate Bill 554, introduced by Sen. Alan Bates, D-Ashland, and House Bill 2734, introduced by Rep. Scott Bruun, R-West Linn -- now move to the Legislature for discussion.

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## Comments

### **ore2008 says...**

Its about darn time!! The fact that only 150 of about 500 actually get out and work should tell someone to check their tax records. People are using these boats as write offs and nothing more. There are VERY few, if any netters that do not have other jobs (can you say longshoremen?) and those that don't have other jobs have wives that work. They cannot survive on Columbia river fishing. It is something that has run its course and should be outlawed. If restaurants want fresh salmon, get it from the Indians.

Posted on 02/17/09 at 12:34PM

### **kilchisriver says...**

Why mess around - put it to a vote and kick them off ALL rivers!

Posted on 02/17/09 at 1:31PM

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