



The Oregonian



Contact Bill Monroe -
Email: nwbill@aol.com

FORUMS

'SAFE' harbors for nets?

Organizers unveil a plan to move non-tribal gill-netting off the mainstem Columbia

After decades of debate, agitation and bitter feelings between those who hook and those who net salmon, gill-netters' days might be numbered on the lower mainstem Columbia River.

But even if that is the case, as a new coalition hopes, the nets' harvest of prime Pacific Northwest salmon stands to increase, perhaps significantly. The resulting ripple effect from additional salmon could be felt along the entire Oregon Coast as more hatchery salmon become available in the Pacific Ocean.

In short, change is in the air, change that might alter the face of salmon sportfishing in Oregon and southwest Washington -- forever for the better. A broad-based coalition of fish scientists, angling conservation groups and sportfishing industry representatives launched a campaign this weekend to move commercial non-tribal nets off the river and out of the path of returning wild salmon.

"SAFE for Salmon" proposes to instead expand commercial fishing in off-mainstem sloughs and bays, such as practiced in Youngs Bay, Grays River and other locations along the lower Columbia. Gill-netters themselves have suggested a new Youngs Bay-type SAFE zone in Willapa Bay, north of Ilwaco, Wash. Other bays and sloughs along the Columbia could also be opened.

SAFE is an acronym for Select Area Fisheries Enhancement, an existing program supplementing the commercial net fishery with hatchery fish released from net pens and caught for the market when they return as adults. SAFE for Salmon proposes more net pens be filled with hatchery salmon to be released close to the ocean as smolts imprinted on the SAFE areas. That vastly improves their survival rates, since they don't have to swim a gantlet of predators and bad water to get to the ocean.

In exchange, the mainstem Columbia would be managed for sportfishing, currently the safest harvest method because anglers practice catch-and-release on wild salmon with much smaller incidental killing of wild fish.

Tribal net fisheries above Bonneville Dam would not be affected since all hatchery salmon for the restructured net fisheries would come from below the dam.

"It's a win-win for everyone," said Jim Martin, retired fisheries chief for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. Martin is the lead author of SAFE for Salmon's white paper, "Columbia River Fisheries, a new vision." Other authors are Rod Sando, former director of fish and wildlife agencies in Idaho and Minnesota; Bill Shake, retired assistant regional director for fisheries in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regional office in Portland; and Don Swartz, retired fish biologist and Columbia River management team member for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The SAFE for Salmon coalition includes sportfishing conservation groups such as the Association of Northwest Steelheaders, fish preservation groups such as Trout Unlimited, industry officials from sporting goods companies, the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association and the Northwest Guides and Anglers Association. I also am on the coalition's steering committee.

The coalition and its proposal are not connected with the Coastal Conservation Association Pacific Northwest, which has grown to nearly 9,000 members since it arrived in the Northwest two years ago with an eye to ending gill-netting on the Columbia. The CCAPNW leadership is reportedly working on policies but has maintained silence on pending strategies for improving Northwest fisheries.

It's probably preparing for the coming Oregon legislative session. At least one legislator is drafting a bill to end all non-tribal gill-netting in the lower Columbia River, including the current SAFE areas.

"We wholeheartedly support that bill as it pertains to the mainstem Columbia," Martin said. "But we believe our proposal offers a better alternative."

The 2009 Legislature could be the perfect storm for moving gill-nets off the Columbia River.

Angler agitation is growing, fueled in part by quixotic, sometimes 11th-hour season openings and closures. Legislators are almost certain to get an earful from both sides of the debate next spring.

At the same time, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife needs a license fee increase. But asking for more money to fish is a tough sell to anglers watching their seasons shrink.

SAFE for Salmon offers a perfect fit for all sides.

The proposal expands commercial fisheries (and probably adds jobs to fishing communities); eliminates harvest management debates on the mainstem Columbia; allows more wild salmon to escape for spawning; results in major reductions in competition between stray and wild coho on spawning grounds; eliminates most of the wasted uncaught coho returning to hatcheries; potentially expands offshore coho seasons coastwide; ensures continued support for hatchery funding (likely to fade or die with a total ban on nets); and gives salmon managers breathing room on the threshold of global warming and unknown problems on the horizon.

Downsides? Very few.

Funding for additional hatchery logistics could be a challenge, and fewer salmon -- coho and chinook -- will be released in lower Columbia tributaries in both states. Those are small sacrifices for great returns.

Fish and wildlife department leaderships in both states have been briefed, as well as key legislators and others. Fish and wildlife commissions in each state could pre-empt their legislatures and make the proposed changes themselves, but they have balked at taking the lead on harvest reform.

Oregon, however, dropped a minor bombshell Monday by suggesting a change similar to the SAFE for Salmon proposal during a joint-state session called to discuss spring chinook allocations. The Oregon pitch covers only spring chinook, whereas the SAFE for Salmon idea applies to all of the lower river's salmon runs.

It's almost certain the gill-net community will circle its wagons and oppose both proposals. But the ultimate alternative, as Martin and SAFE for Salmon point out, is an outright ban on nets, like those bans in other states over the past century. That could come from the Legislature as early as next year or after continued protracted debate over the next several years.

Why waste precious time, sacrifice wild salmon and forgo what could become major improvements in the way we all fish together?

SAFE for Salmon's proposal is posted on several Web sites and pending on others. They include www.ifish.net, theguidesforecast.com, www.berkley-fishing.com and nsiafishing.org.

The coalition is raising money for a legislative campaign and has more than \$45,000 committed. Until an office is opened, questions for the coalition and/or the proposal's authors are being handled through the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association, either on its Web site or by calling 503-631-8859.

In more than three decades of covering sport fisheries and concern over gill-netting on the Columbia, I've remained a steadfast supporter of both sport and commercial fishing on the river.

This proposal is the first in all those years to offer a clear and improved vision for the future of the Columbia's beleaguered salmon.

Bill Monroe is a freelance outdoors writer. He can be reached at nwbill@aol.com View the SAFE for Salmon white paper on his blog at: <http://blog.oregonlive.com/billmonroe/>