

Gill-nets: The tangle on the Columbia River

by The Editorial Board The Oregonian

Wednesday February 19, 2009

A new proposal would move gill-netters into bays and side channels, which would reduce the incidental take of protected wild salmon on the Columbia.

The long dispute between gill-netters and sport fishermen over Columbia River salmon and steelhead has led to nothing but bitterness and ever-more pressure on threatened fish. The issue of how to divide the catch on the Columbia has even paralyzed fishing regulations on the river by pitting the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission against its counterpart in Washington.

Now sport fishermen have offered a promising proposal: Confine gillnetting to bays and side channels, and use hatchery fish to seed those areas.

That would get gill-netters out of the main stem of the Columbia and away from most of the threatened and endangered salmon passing upriver. That would reduce the incidental take of fish on the Endangered Species list by gillnetting, and presumably allow federal and state policymakers to permit longer sport fishing seasons for hatchery fish.

The sport fishing groups backing the "SAFE for Salmon" plan in the Oregon Legislature call it a "win-win" proposal for gillnetters and sport fishermen, and maybe it actually would work out that way. But gillnetters naturally fear that they would be literally sidelined from Columbia River fishing by the proposal. The idea needs more public and scientific review before legislators write it into law.

Jim Martin, a former head of Oregon's fisheries division and a chief proponent of SAFE for Salmon notes that two-thirds of the gillnetters' spring chinook catch already is occurring in SAFE areas, including Youngs Bay in Astoria. It does seem possible to make more hatchery salmon available in bays and side channels to provide adequate fish for the 150 or so active gill-netters on the Columbia.

It would be good for the Northwest to figure out a way to end the long, loud dispute over gill-nets in a way that keeps alive the century-old tradition of commercial gill-netting without damaging fragile wild salmon runs and forcing fish managers to prematurely shut down the lucrative sport fishing industry simply because gill-nets have killed too many wild fish.

Gill-netters and their advocates in the Legislature should give this new proposal a long, careful look. It's also vital that state fisheries agencies, Bonneville, the tribes and others fully consider the proposal; the Legislature badly needs their expertise and guidance on this issue.

This may or may not be the answer. But it sure beats attempting to legislate the gill-netting issue through the citizen initiative. That's happened before, and it will happen again if the Legislature cannot find a better way to resolve the dispute between gill-netters and sport fishers on the Columbia River.