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[EDITORIAL: Selective fishing is best \(http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/opinion/12093889-47/story.csp\)](http://www.registerguard.com/csp/cms/sites/web/opinion/12093889-47/story.csp)

Time to move gill nets off the Columbia's main stem

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Sport and commercial salmon fishermen on the Columbia River have been fighting for years over allocation of an increasingly limited resource. The argument has traditionally been couched in monetary terms, with each side claiming to represent a vital sector of the Oregon economy. It has also been seen as a zero-sum contest in which one side can gain only at the expense of the other.

It's time for a fresh look. Oregonians should stop fighting over how to allocate fish, and begin working together to strengthen the fishery. More robust salmon runs in the Columbia and its tributaries, and greater confidence that endangered salmon species will recover, would benefit sport and commercial fishermen alike. A key step is to favor selective fishing methods, so that fewer threatened fish are accidentally caught along with more abundant species. That means getting gill-net fishermen off the main channel of the Columbia River.

The gill-net fleet has about 135 boats, two-thirds of them based in Oregon. This part of the commercial fishery is a mainstay of the economy of communities on the lower Columbia River. Though the mesh of gill nets can be sized to target particular fish species, the targeting is imprecise — other types of fish, particularly sturgeon and steelhead, get caught in gill nets and die before they can be released.

An even bigger problem is that gill nets can't distinguish between wild and hatchery-raised salmon. Sport fishermen can: The fins of hatchery salmon are clipped, so wild fish that are caught can be readily identified and released. The entire fishery is managed to protect wild fish stocks, so even if hatchery salmon are abundant, fishing seasons may need to be restricted to ensure the survival of wild fish.

House Bill 2734 in the state Legislature would address both problems — bycatch and the intermingling of wild and hatchery fish. It's called the SAFE for salmon plan. The acronym stands for Select Area Fisheries Enhancement. The proposal calls for hatchery salmon to be penned in Columbia River bays or side channels for a few weeks before being allowed to migrate to the ocean. Upon their return migration, their instinct would lead them back to the bays and channels they would regard as their home waters. Gill-net fishermen would be restricted to those areas, which would be chosen for the fact that wild and bycatch fish are seldom found in them.

The result would be improved survival rates for every type of fish except hatchery salmon. Seasons for both the sport and commercial fishery could eventually be expanded as fishing pressure on wild stocks subsided. Upriver sport fisheries such as those of the Willamette and Mc-Kenzie rivers would improve.

A second proposal, House Bill 2579, would allow commercial fishermen to use seines and fish traps on the lower Columbia. Such gear has long been banned because it is highly efficient. But fishermen using seines or traps could release wild and bycatch fish without harming them. The

sponsors believe gill- netters would adopt the more efficient and selective gear, improving the fishery for everyone.

The sport fishery would be a primary beneficiary of either proposal. That would be good news for Oregon. The sport fishing industry supports 11,000 jobs in the state, with payrolls totaling \$330 million. The industry could be even bigger if there were more fish to catch during longer seasons. A salmon caught by a sports fisherman generates five times as much economic activity as the same fish caught in a gill net. But if the fishery were more robust, the gill-netter and the angler wouldn't have to fight over that one fish — there would be more fish for both.

Either bill would bring progress. The SAFE plan, however, does not depend on gill-netters' willingness to buy new equipment, and may offer the best promise of keeping the main stem of the Columbia open for wild salmon migration. The river's commercial fishery would survive, and the sports fishing industry would thrive. It's time for Oregon to resolve the long-running argument over fishing methods in the fishery's favor, understanding that what's good for fish is good for fishermen.

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