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### Oregon floats bold chinook reallocation idea

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By ALLEN THOMAS COLUMBIAN STAFF WRITER

The proposal was full of caveat words like "draft," "conceptual framework," "strawman," and "hypothetical situation."

But here's what was happening: The No. 2 man for the Oregon fisheries agency was unveiling a scenario that would phase the gillnetters largely off the main Columbia River and into off-channel areas for spring chinook salmon.

It was a framework designed to keep sport fishing in the lower Columbia open through April most years, and make the spring salmon pie bigger for both groups.

The Columbia River Fish Working Group met for the first time two weeks ago. The group includes three Fish and Wildlife Commission members from both Washington and Oregon.

The six will meet again once in October and once in November, with a recommendation for spring chinook sharing between sports and commercials ready for their full commissions by December.

Spring chinook allocation is among the most bitterly contentious issues in the lower Columbia River. Sportsmen and commercials testify for six hours before each commission when allocation decisions are being made.

In 2007, Washington's commission voted to favor the sport fleet by a 65 percent-35 percent margin, while Oregon rolled over the previous 57-43 division of spring chinook.

The states compromised at 61 percent sport-39 percent commercial.

After the bruising allocation fight, Washington and Oregon created a Columbia River Visioning group made up of sport and commercial representatives to work out a long-term solution.

That process unraveled, with several sport-fishing representatives eventually resigning. So, in essence, committees of each commission are hammering out a new plan.

The most interesting portion of the first Working Group meeting two weeks ago in Vancouver was the "conceptual framework" shared by Curt Melcher, deputy director of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Melcher said the problem of spring chinook allocation is it is a "zero-sum debate. If one side gains, the other has to lose."

The "vision" shared by Melcher tries to improve both sport and commercial fishing.

Key to the vision would be optimizing the commercial catch in the "select-area" fisheries. "Select area" is the buzzword for off-channel locations like Youngs Bay, Tongue Point, Blind Slough and the mouth of Deep River in the Columbia estuary.

Select-area commercial fisheries have been ongoing for many years.

The Oregon vision would boost spring chinook releases in the select areas and try to provide a stable harvest of about 12,000 or more spring chinook annually for the commercials. That number is about the combined catch of the existing select area and mainstem Columbia commercial spring fisheries.

The No. 1 priority for using the allowed incidental harvest of endangered spring chinook would be the select areas. About 2 percent of the wild run of endangered upper Columbia-Snake River spring chinook is allowed to be taken incidentally to harvest from healthy hatchery runs.

New select areas, such as inside Willapa Bay, might be developed.

Gillnet catch in the main Columbia would range from none to about 6,000 depending on the strength of the run. This scenario is assumed to need about 20 percent of allowed incidental catch of endangered spring chinook.

That would leave 80 percent of the incidental catch available for sport fishing, which should be enough to get through April most years.

Until the infrastructure is ready to boost the commercial's select-area catch, Melcher's scenario set aside 40 percent of the incidental catch as a buffer in case the run is worse than forecast, then prioritized sport fishing slightly in April and commercial catch in May, averaging an approximately 67 percent sport-33 percent commercial share.

The Oregon vision was met with general approval by sportsmen's group representatives, while the commercials were wary.

"I like this," said fishing guide Jack Glass of Troutdale, Ore. "This is a direction we need to build on."

But Irene Martin of Skamokawa, representing the commercials, said all the risk is on their side. It's been a big struggle with the federal agencies such as the Bonneville Power Administration to keep the

financing for the existing fish releases in the select areas.

Bruce Buckmaster of Astoria, also a commercial representative, said the onus of making such a plan work needs to be on sports fishermen.

He suggested allocating spring chinook 50-50 until the financing is in place to improve the select areas. That would energize sports groups into helping secure the funding.

"I worry about getting pushed off to the side where we can be easily forgotten," Buckmaster said.

The next session of the Columbia River Fish Working Group will be Oct. 15 at a time and location to be determined in the Portland area.

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