

Work begins on Columbia off-channel salmon enhancement

Moving spring salmon to “select” areas would allow longer sport season

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Oregon is looking at moving more spring chinook chinook salmon production into off-channel areas such as Youngs Bay near Astoria as part of future fish management in lower Columbia River.

“We’re already exploring moving fish,” said Steve Williams, an assistant administrator of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. “We could move some portion as soon as 2010 with the existing facilities.”

Williams made his comments before a meeting of the Washington and Oregon fish and wildlife commissions last week.

Proposals by both a sport-fishing advocacy group and the Oregon fish agency suggest boosting the production of spring chinook in off-channel areas such as Youngs Bay, Tongue Point and Blind Slough in Oregon, plus Deep River in Washington, for commercial harvest.

In September, Curt Melcher, deputy director of the Oregon department, floated the idea of increasing the off-channel production by 1 million young spring chinook reprogrammed from the Willamette River as a tradeoff for harvest reductions by the gillnet fleet in the main Columbia.

The goal is to provide a relatively stable harvest of about 12,000 adult spring chinook annually in the off-channel areas. Expanding the off-channel commercial areas to Willapa Bay also was mentioned.

Williams said to boost the off-channel areas to a full million spring chinook would require additional net pens and workers to feed the young salmon.

Spring and fall chinook along with coho have been reared in net pens in the off-channel areas near the mouth of the Columbia River for two decades. In fishery circles, those locations are called “select” “SAFE” areas, an acronym for Select Area Fisheries Enhancement.

Commercial catches since 2000 in the off-channel areas has ranged from about 2,500 to 12,000.

Guy Norman of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, told the commissions not to expect help soon getting extra spring chinook production out of the Cowlitz, Kalama and Lewis rivers.

Hatcheries on the Cowlitz and Lewis rivers are financed by utility companies as compensation for habitat losses caused by their hydroelectric dams.

Norman said those hatcheries have specific production requirements for their lower basins, plus support restoration of salmon in their upper basins.

Kalama Falls Hatchery is supported by the federal government through the Mitchell Act, passed in 1938 to provide fish as mitigation for losses in the Columbia River due to dams.

“We don’t have a very viable option soon,” Norman said.

Getting extra spring chinook from the Washington-side tributaries may be possible, but only after going through a process with the utility companies, he added.