

Local view: Selective fishing rule should be extended

By Bryan Irwin

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After years of advocacy spearheaded by the Coastal Conservation Association, the Washington and Oregon state departments of Fish and Wildlife have agreed to reinstitute a mark-selective recreational fishery for Columbia River summer chinook this year.

Mark-selective fishing refers to the ability of anglers to identify hatchery salmon from wild salmon and release the wild salmon alive. Because nearly all hatchery salmon have their adipose fin removed, this distinction is easily made.

Mark-selective fishing has clear biological benefits for salmon and is part of the solution to increasing wild fish returns to their native habitats while providing increased fishing opportunity for hatchery salmon. Research has shown that protecting wild fish and controlling the number of hatchery spawners are keys to restoring and maintaining wild fish runs.

We commend this return to selective sportfishing for summer chinook. The new mark-selective rule will more than double the usual sportfishing season length from 21 days to 46 days and increase the possibility of catching greater numbers of hatchery chinook. This substantial increase in recreational opportunity during prime fishing weather will fuel significant economic activity from Priest Rapids Dam between Yakima and Grant counties in Washington to the mouth of the Columbia at Astoria, Ore.

The decision also brings into sharp focus the dangers of the nonselective commercial gillnet fishery that continues to target these fish. This nonselective fishery for summer chinook, conducted since 2006, impacts not only wild Columbia summer chinook but five other salmon and steelhead stocks listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act also present in the river during fishing season. In light of this alarming mortality to wild and ESA-listed salmon populations, this fishery should not continue unless and until it can become fully mark selective.

While fishery managers have instituted more stringent rules to better protect wild salmon during the ESA-listed spring chinook fishery, commercial fishing for summer chinook is entirely nonselective. Accordingly, gillnetters need not gently handle and release wild chinook but will keep all chinook caught and sell them to the public. Unwittingly, their customers will buy depleted wild Columbia summer chinook with listed Snake River spring chinook and listed Snake River summer chinook. As if this immense bycatch of endangered salmon is not enough to turn the stomach, an unreported number of Snake River sockeye, Snake River summer steelhead and Columbia summer steelhead — all of which are listed under the ESA — will be maimed or killed by these nets to maintain this commercial fishery.

Flawed logic

The logic supporting nonselective gillnet fishery should trigger citizen alarm. First, managers argue that the wild Columbia summer chinook run, though very fragile, is not (yet) ESA listed, therefore a selective fishery has not been required. Next, due to extensive mortality caused by the nets in the warm water (40 percent or more) as well as the presence of many other nontarget species during the season, the gillnet fishery for summer chinook can't be made selective.

Because gillnets suffocate fish before they can be selected, they are completely inappropriate for mixed stock, mark-selective salmon fisheries in which target and nontarget fish are virtually identical in size and run timing. In fact, there is no gillnet season more illustrative of the nonselective and wasteful nature of the gillnet than the Columbia summer chinook commercial fishery. A more prudent approach would be to simply close this fishery until selective means of commercial harvest, currently being tested, are required.

The CCA applauds this first step taken by the WDFW and the ODFW toward selective harvest for summer chinook by all. We will redouble our efforts to work with fishery managers and other policymakers to encourage a timely end to the nonselective gillnet fishery for summer chinook, and a transition to sustainable mark-selective recreational and commercial fisheries in the Columbia River.

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