



## A Rebuttal to the NSIA's "SAFE for Salmon" Proposal

NSIA's "SAFE for Salmon" proposal was written by a committee of retired agency managers with government pensions, who are seeking to eliminate commercial fishing jobs held by real, working people in hard-pressed rural communities.

The proposal advanced by Martin *et al* not only misuses the program name of the Select Area Fisheries Enhancement project, but misappropriates its conceptual basis. The Select Area fisheries never were intended to replace mainstem fishing when fishing the mainstem was deemed to be biologically defensible, as it has been since the year 2000. The Select Area fisheries were in fact intended to supplement the commercial fishery.

The fish with the highest market value in Columbia River fisheries, and the ones most highly sought by consumers, are upriver stocks bound for areas above the hydroelectric dams on the Columbia. They include upriver spring Chinook, summer Chinook, and Upriver Bright fall Chinook. None of those stocks are suitable for net pen acclimation in the Select Areas, because upriver stocks are genetically keyed to pass through the lower river quickly. Upriver stocks do not develop a homing instinct to return to the area of net-pen rearing sites. The stocks suited for rearing in the net-pen enhancement project are all lower river stocks.

Assertions by the NSIA to the contrary, commercial impacts on steelhead are minimal compared to sport impacts on wild steelhead. For instance, during the spring fishery, commercial impacts on wild winter steelhead have been under 0.5% for the past several years, while recreational impacts have ranged as high as 6% and 7%.

The claim that sport fishing involves just minor by-catch mortality of non-target species is an unproven assertion. The current 10% hooking/handling mortality figure used in the sport fishery is based on a study conducted by Bob Lindsey in the Willamette Spring Chinook fishery, which yielded a 12.2% hooking mortality. That figure was reduced to 10% for the mainstem on the basis of a now 23-year-old literature review, which indicated that a higher percentage of the mainstem sport catch was jaw-hooked rather than hooked in the throat. Since that time fishing techniques have changed. That assumption needs to be revisited if we are really serious about affording protection to non-target stocks and the science that supports those assumptions.

In comparison, PIT tag data from 2003 on the spring Chinook showed that the post-release mortality in the commercial tangle-net fishery for spring Chinook is 12.7%. An estimated 2% pinniped mortality was then added to the tangle-net mortality figure, but no corresponding adjustment was made to the recreational mortality figure.

Because the gillnet fishery is more efficient than the recreational fishery, commercial fishermen can profitably fish both before and after peak abundance in the mainstem Columbia. Sport fisheries need to fish at times of peak abundance to be effective. This is especially the case during the early fall and late fall fisheries, in which recreational fisheries take much higher numbers of critical stocks, while catching fewer of the non-critical stocks.

A hooking mortality study in the coho fishery in British Columbia returned a hooking mortality rate of approximately 18% on adult coho and 30% on coho jacks in the Fraser River. Salmon stress easily when handled in warmer water, which is one reason the hooking mortality is dramatically higher in a mark selective fishery for coho than it is for spring Chinook. To date, there have been no hooking mortality studies in the Columbia River system when water temperatures are warmer than during spring. And there are no recent and verifiable studies of hooking mortalities on the Columbia River mainstem whatsoever.

The principle of Time, Area and Gear selectivity is that the commercial gear is deployed when abundance of target stocks is high, and the abundance of stocks of concern is low. Commercial gear is 100% selective when it is not being fished, which is how large-mesh gear is managed for selective fisheries. If the fisherman cannot retain the fish, it is arguably better not to handle them in the first place than it is to catch and release them.

The Martin plan's statements about tangle net gear also are misleading. Since 2003, using tangle nets has kept steelhead mortalities in the spring commercial fishery under 0.5%. The comment about short sturgeon being caught in tangle nets is also deliberately misleading. The tangle net fishery was specifically developed for a mark-selective spring Chinook fishery. Commercial fishermen report that interactions with any sturgeon of any size are a rarity during the time frame tangle nets are deployed. Tangle nets are used in combination with live recovery boxes, into which unmarked (and presumably wild) fish must be placed to recuperate if they are lethargic or bleeding. Live recovery boxes have proven extremely effective in improving the survival rates of unmarked fish released back into the river.

The Martin Plan is to move the commercial fleet into confined areas off the mainstem, and let them harvest only the pickings of what are left after an intensive sport fishery hammers the stocks supposedly being raised to sustain a commercial fishery, and by extension, the public's access to the resource. That is exactly what happened during the 2007 Select Area coho season.

If "better economics with a lighter touch on the resource" sounds too good to be true, that's probably because it is. The "better economics" part of the equation is based on an economic model for the sport fishery that is additive. In other words, every dollar spent in pursuit of the fishery is assumed to add value to the fishery. By comparison, this same analysis makes the assumption that the value of the commercial fishery is based on the ex-vessel price per pound, from which the cost of doing business is subtracted, producing a net economic value. Basing an economic comparison between sport and commercial fishing on assumptions that are additive on one side and subtractive on the other is an apples-to-oranges comparison. Unbiased and independent economic studies indicate that the relative economic values of the recreational and commercial fisheries are just about equal.

As recently calculated by Rob Sudar, a Longview fish buyer for specialty markets, the 90 spring Chinook he marketed to the Seattle restaurant market in 2007 translated to 1,800 meals at an average market price of \$40.00 a plate, producing a real economic value of \$72,000. The fact is, most salmon marketed to consumers ends up as meals served in a restaurant setting. Another economic analysis based on the price of restaurant meals throughout the year show that, on average, a typical salmon will provide up to 28 restaurant meals at \$25 a plate.

One of the common scare tactics used by opponents of commercial fishing to point is to "front-loading" commercial fisheries as a danger to the resource. In recent years the sport fishery has been front-loaded during spring, summer, and fall seasons, during which the recreational fishery has exceeded its impact allocations, in effect, robbing consumers of their share of the resource.

Increased production in the Select Areas is going to require an expansion into secondary sites rejected during the expansion of the terminal fisheries program during the mid-1990s, because interception of non-local and listed stocks in those areas was unacceptably high. All the most successful Select Areas already have been developed. None has the room to accommodate a full fleet fishery. The secondary sites originally identified in 1995 turned out to be major migratory corridors for listed stocks and other stocks of concern.

Where is the funding going to come from to implement the increased production proposed for the Select Areas? Both the states of Oregon and Washington are running budget deficits. With the current economic outlook, programs are more likely to be slashed than to be augmented. Oregon Governor Kulongoski has ordered a spending freeze on all new and existing programs.

As outlined by Jim Martin and company, pinning the conflict over non-Indian allocations on the Endangered Species Act and *US v. Oregon* accords rather conveniently overlooks the fact that sport fishermen have been trying to eliminate the Columbia River commercial gillnet fishery for the past 50 years. Further, the right to fish in their usual and accustomed places was reserved by the Treaty Tribes in treaties concluded as sovereign nations with the United States. The Tribes in fact are being generous to share some of the impacts available under the Endangered Species Act with non-Indian fisheries. We all need to learn to live with that.

One reason the sport fishery has been stressed is uncontrolled growth in the professional guide fishery, which is, in essence, a commercial fishery sharing in the recreational impact limit. The guide fishery in Oregon is the only commercial fishery on the West Coast that does not have limited entry. It is a destabilizing influence on all non-Indian fisheries, both recreational and commercial.

The truth is that the number of sport fishing licenses in Oregon and Washington has been declining for the past several years. In the challenging economic times we are facing, that trend is likely to continue. Due to the high cost of sport fishing for salmon, recreational salmon fishing is a self-selecting niche market segment of the overall population. Further, sport fishing licenses support only about 30% of the cost of hatchery fish production<sup>1</sup>. Even at current allocations and catch rates, that means that better than 90%<sup>2</sup> of us who pay for our share of the 70% of production costs for hatchery fish, have access to considerably less than 50% of the fish we all pay for. The Martin plan will only make that worse.

Would eliminating the consumer's access to fish in the Columbia River mainstem (by removing the commercial fleet to the Select Areas) double the sport fishery? The sport fishery already gets an average of 80% of all spring Chinook caught in the Columbia River system. They also get considerably more than their half of the 30% of the summer Chinook non-Indian allocation reserved for below Priest Rapids dam, and most of it above. In the fall Chinook fishery, where the sport fishery generates by far the greatest impacts on stocks of concern and listed stocks, perhaps their numbers would come close to doubling. But, except for Select Area Brights, which are limited to Youngs Bay alone, the public would lose all access to bright fall Chinook salmon. The recreational fishery already gets 80% of all sturgeon caught. Confining the commercial fishery to the Select Areas would give the sport fishery an additional 16% of the sturgeon, which would hardly be fair to consumers, but wouldn't come close to doubling sport fishing either. Since coho generally don't bite after acclimating to fresh water in-river, the sport fishery is unable to catch coho effectively except in the ocean charter fishery and the Buoy 10 fishery. Having the mainstem all to themselves is unlikely to double the sports' catch of coho either.

ODFW studies show that moving coho smolts into the Select Areas increases ocean survival rates for coho adults from 1.9% in traditional hatcheries to 2.4% in the Select Areas, which amounts to an increase of 26%, not 200% as Martin *et al* would have us believe. For spring Chinook, survival increases from 0.79% to 0.88% in the Select Areas, which is only an 11% improvement. The only fall Chinook stock released from any of the Select Areas is the Select Area Bright, which is confined to Youngs Bay alone. No fall Chinook stocks of any type have proven successful at the other sites, due to unacceptably high straying rates.

Moving hatchery smolts to the Select Areas is only a viable option with some Columbia River salmon stocks, but not the most valuable stocks. Would moving more stocks into the Select Areas actually enable commercial fishermen to catch as many fish as they do now in the mainstem? Not likely. Firstly, the Select Areas are extremely constrained. Secondly, there is no guarantee of funding to accomplish this proposal, even if it were to prove possible. Thirdly, the Select Areas confine the stocks returning them into narrow areas tailor-made for the opportunistic feeding habits of California sea lions and harbor seals. Without a mainstem fishery to spread out the fishing area and hence pinniped abundance, Select Areas would become magnets for hungry sea lions and harbor seals. A huge percentage of returning adult salmon would be lost to pinniped predation, which is already a growing problem in Select Area fisheries, even with mainstem fishing to provide a distraction to divert some of the problem animals away from fishermen in the Select Area fisheries.

The Martin plan suggests that issues with overcrowding in the Select Areas could be assuaged by letting commercial fishermen fish on alternate days. It makes just as much sense to say that the stated problems of the sport fishery could be reduced by deploying parts of the recreational fleet on alternate days in their appointed fishing areas, especially the professional fishing guide fishery, since the guide fishery uses up a large share of the recreational impact allocations. As outlined by WDFW fishery managers, the sport fishery is unlikely to be able to fish through the end of April during the spring Chinook fishery unless the fishery is reduced to three days a week. And, as outlined before, there are no areas into which the SAFE program can be expanded without impacting untold extra numbers of listed stocks and stocks of concern. Even Select Area fisheries require impacts to operate.

Despite assertions to the contrary, gillnet fisheries have not been eliminated everywhere else in America. Gillnet fisheries are still a mainstay of commercial fisheries in several states, including Alaska, Washington, and California. There are even gillnet fisheries still in operation on the Gulf Coast, despite decades of efforts by the Coastal Conservation Association to eliminate them. Gillnetters are no more market hunters than any other commercial fishery, which, by definition, are fisheries prosecuted by a small, select group of trained professionals who provide access to the resource for the general, non-fishing public. That's simply the way commercial fisheries operate. When Jim Martin and company compare gillnetting to "market hunting," it should be recognized for what it is — a cheap shot.

The truth is that the plan introduced by Martin *et al* is one step further toward the death knell of hatchery programs as we now know them. Most hatcheries currently in operation depend wholly or in part on federal Mitchell Act funding. The Mitchell Act originally was passed to mitigate for fishing opportunity lost by the commercial fleet because of the construction of the federal hydropower system in the Columbia River basin. Since recreational fisheries have proven inefficient at keeping hatchery strays off natural spawning beds, Mitchell Act hatcheries cannot be operated in compliance with the Endangered Species Act without a commercial fishery.

Another sticking point is that currently better than 80% of the funding for the SAFE program comes from federal sources, such as the BPA, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, and Mitchell Act funding, primarily, as stated before, as mitigation for fishing opportunities lost by the commercial fleet because of the development of the federal Columbia River hydropower system. If the commercial fleet is to be permanently penned into side channels and terminal areas off the mainstem, which are unsuitable for propagating or acclimating stocks originating above the federal hydropower system, why should the federal government continue to spend program dollars intended to mitigate for fish lost to the federal hydropower system, especially when those program dollars have been spent with great reluctance in the past? If there is no incentive for continued federal support of the program, the burden would necessarily be transferred to the states of Oregon and Washington. And frankly, the states can't afford it. And with no commercial fishing in the Columbia River mainstem, continued Mitchell Act funding of the hatchery system will be at risk.

The Martin plan was written by a group of retired government employees with fat pensions and nothing better to do than go hunting and fishing, who have cooked up a way to take away the jobs of working men and women in rural counties that rank among the poorest in the states of Oregon and Washington. And for what reason? Apparently, it is so that they can get a few more days fishing time in. Where is the economic justice in this plan? Lower river communities with their fishing dependent economies will be devastated by the effects of this proposal, which will transfer economic opportunity from lower river communities to the Portland/Vancouver metropolitan area. The Martin plan will not turn the Pacific Northwest into "a sport fishing economic engine," nor will it "double sport fishing opportunity." And most certainly, without a doubt, if adopted, it would in fact reduce the amount of Columbia River salmon available to the market for the average consumer, as well as the highest quality varieties they now enjoy. The Martin plan seeks to marginalize the commercial gillnet fleet by placing them in side channel ghettos. It is the first step in the process of annihilation for the commercial fleet, despite the attempt at window-dressing the attempt as a compromise for everyone's benefit.

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- <sup>1</sup> At the time this rebuttal was originally written, we believed that sport licenses actually paid for about a third of the cost of Columbia River hatchery production. But figures recently provided by ODFW reveal that all license fees together, sport and commercial, account for only a little over 1% of the cost of these programs. See "Columbia River Hatchery Operating Costs.pdf"
- <sup>2</sup> As it turns out, "We the People," i.e. the general non-fishing public, outnumber sport fishermen by about 98 to 1. Consumers, taxpayers and rate-payers are the ones paying for hatchery production. And consumers by and large are dependent on commercial fishermen for access to the resource for which they are paying.