

Fisheries' future needs thoughtful examination

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Commentary by Kent Martin
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The position all fisheries on the Columbia River find themselves in is due to the listing of several salmon populations under the Endangered Species Act. Because these populations return at the same time as other healthy runs of salmon, harvest, whether sport or commercial, is designed to avoid, or release unharmed, any of the endangered salmon caught while harvesting healthy stocks. In the recreational fishery, that means releasing unmarked wild fish from a hook, but there is still a mortality rate on the released fish of 20 percent in the ocean and at Buoy 10, and 10 percent in-river. These are known as impacts. Currently, that 10 percent number is being studied, with the likelihood it may be higher, particularly during warm water temperatures in summer and fall.

In the Columbia River commercial gillnet fishery, several management strategies are used. The timing and location of a fishing period will target peak abundance of the hatchery stocks. Mesh sizes are regulated to maximize capture of healthy stocks while avoiding bycatch. For example, an eight inch mesh will capture unlisted summer Chinook while allowing the much smaller blueback or sockeye, which are listed, to pass through unharmed. In the spring Chinook fishery, the tangle net/live box combination is used to resuscitate unmarked wild fish. Of these released fish, the mortality rate is 14.8 percent, with efforts being made to bring it lower yet.

Reducing the number of hatchery fish that stray and compete on the spawning beds with native fish is a goal of the Hatchery Scientific Review Group to maximize survival of listed stocks. Commercial fishers are experimenting with alternative methods of harvest, including beach seines, purse seines and a fish trap, gears used historically on the Columbia. The gear must be adapted to today's changed river conditions and be economically feasible in terms of labor and capital. The resulting product must be of high quality but also affordable.

Unfortunately, at this time the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission has not committed to reserving any impacts for new gear developed by commercial fishers. Further, despite their investment in and documented success of the tangle net/live box combination, commercial fishers saw their spring Chinook fishery reduced in 2008 and '09 by the commission. Predictably, prices to consumers reached record levels, due to the law of supply and demand. There is considerable cynicism in the fleet about

pursuing alternative gear experimentation when their previous investments in alternative gear have resulted not in more fish but less. A seining operation could cost in the vicinity of \$100,000. What business invests in a new approach without some belief that there will be a return on investment?

These are complex issues and deserve to be carefully thought through with all the parties involved. The next generation of commercial and recreational fishers depends on today's leadership to make choices to ensure a fishing legacy for the future of our communities and the high quality fresh local fish that the Northwest is known for. The challenge will be to expand our vision beyond the current narrow factionalism that is hampering sincere efforts to do the right thing for the fish. Adapting fishing gear, whether sport or commercial, is comparatively easy. The harder part will be letting go of old prejudices, rivalry and enmity in the interest of ensuring the health of the salmon's home among us.

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