



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

The Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) finalized 2023 ocean salmon seasons earlier this year. Due to poor forecasted returns for Chinook salmon returning to the Sacramento and Klamath rivers in California, fisheries impacting these stocks are severely constrained or closed this year, including a full closure of the Oregon commercial troll fishery through August from Cape Falcon (on the north Oregon coast) to the California border. Although a meaningful coho-directed fishery is available for recreational fishers, only limited late-fall commercial opportunity is scheduled to allow some access to healthy Oregon salmon stocks after most Sacramento and Klamath salmon have left the area. No Chinook-directed recreational or commercial salmon seasons are planned for the Ocean waters south of Humbug Mountain.

Terminal ocean salmon fisheries in nearshore state waters adjacent to the Elk/Sixes rivers occurred during most years from 1979 to 2018. These recreational and commercial Chinook-directed fisheries have not occurred in recent years due to low returns. The wild Chinook populations are managed by conservation metrics established in the Coastal Multi-Species Conservation and Management Plan (CMP, ODFW 2014). The forecasted returns for the Elk River in 2023 is improved, providing an opportunity to re-instate a terminal ocean fishery in state waters adjacent to the Elk/Sixes rivers.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Potential terminal state-water fisheries were addressed during meetings associated with the 2023 PFMC process, which included the following opportunities for comment:

- The Department held a pre-season public meeting on February 27, 2023, in Newport.
- The March and April PFMC meetings were open to the public with opportunities for public testimony.
- A PFMC Oregon public hearing was held on March 20, 2023, in North Bend to discuss salmon fishery options for the area south of Cape Falcon to the Oregon/California border.

Nearly all meetings were held in a hybrid format providing for in-person as well as virtual participation.

The Elk terminal fishery was also discussed during a June 14, 2023, webinar on 2023 Coastal fall salmon season planning.

ISSUE

Consider regulations implementing commercial and recreational salmon fisheries for the Elk River ocean terminal area.

ANALYSIS

Although the Elk River ocean terminal fishery, or “bubble fishery,” is open to both recreational and commercial fishers, it is primarily utilized by commercial trollers launching out of Port Orford, Oregon. The fall Chinook fishery occurs in November when most other commercial fishing opportunities have ended. The 2023 forecasts for Elk River (n=1,906) and Sixes River (n=3,024) wild Chinook are 129% and 136% of the recent five-year averages.

Based on past coded-wire tag recoveries, harvest in this fishery is focused on local-origin fish, primarily Elk and Sixes stocks, which comprise $\geq 80\%$ and $\leq 20\%$ of the annual harvest. Of the Elk River Chinook, approximately 50 to 60% are hatchery-origin.

Elk River wild Chinook were identified as a stock of concern in the 2014 CMP due to an elevated percent hatchery-origin spawners (pHOS) and low recruits-per-spawner. However, a 2020 ODFW status assessment update on Elk River wild fall Chinook found that pHOS is declining and is currently meeting goals, therefore the productivity of wild Chinook in the basin is expected to improve. Recent returns have been tracking well above the CMP conservation threshold of 690 fish and the average pHOS rate of 25% (recent nine-year average) is now below the 30% objective outlined in the CMP.

The proposed regulations for an Elk River “bubble fishery” were crafted from previous season structures with known harvest and would include daily bag/landing limits of one Chinook for recreational fishers and 10 fish for commercial fishers that are expected to produce a total harvest of 600 Chinook, or less of which approximately 200 would be wild-origin Elk River Chinook. The fishery has strong support by commercial troll fishers and the local community since it provides significant benefit to Curry County and the Port Orford area during an otherwise slow time for commercial fishing. It is anticipated approximately 15 to 20 trollers will participate in the fishery. Staff believe this opportunity can be provided due to its limited impact to Elk and Sixes wild Chinook.

OPTIONS

Option 1: For the Elk Terminal Ocean Area Fisheries, adopt commercial and recreational fisheries as provided in Attachment 3.

Option 2: Take no action (fishery remains closed).

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Option 1

DRAFT MOTION

I move to adopt the staff recommendations to OAR 635-003-0085 and 635-013-0007 as proposed in Attachment 3.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Upon filing