

OREGON AND WASHINGTON DEPARTMENTS OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
JOINT STAFF REPORT - WINTER FACT SHEET NO. 3
Columbia River Compact/Joint State Hearing
January 8, 2026

<i>Fisheries under consideration:</i> Non-treaty mainstem commercial smelt John Day Pool recreational white sturgeon
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Detailed information on stock status and management guidelines for Columbia River fisheries are presented in Joint Staff Reports. The most recent report is the 2026 Smelt Report (December 22, 2025). The most recent report relevant to sturgeon fisheries is the 2025 Joint Staff Report Concerning Stock Status and Fisheries for Sturgeon and Smelt (January 7, 2025). The 2026 Sturgeon Report will be available by late January.

Joint Staff Reports are available at:

*<https://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/management/columbia-river/reports> or
<https://www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/OSCRP/CRM/jsmreports.asp>.*

RIVER CONDITIONS

- As of January 6, the five-day average outflow at Bonneville Dam is 202 kcfs compared to the five-year average of 150 kcfs. The current five-day average water temperature at Bonneville Dam is 43°F compared to the five-year average of 41°F. The recent five-day average visibility at Bonneville Dam is three feet compared to the five-year average of 6.4 feet.

STOCK STATUS

Columbia River Smelt (Eulachon)

- Columbia River smelt (Eulachon) return annually to the Columbia River to spawn in the mainstem and several of its tributaries downstream of Bonneville Dam. The fish typically begin to enter the Columbia River in December and peak tributary abundance usually occurs in February or March. Columbia River smelt are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).
- Over the last ten years, Eulachon abundance has ranged from the low of 370,000 pounds observed in 2018 to a high of 18.3 million pounds in 2022. Eulachon abundance in 2025 was 7.1 million pounds, less than the 10-year average of 8.1 million pounds.

White Sturgeon

- White sturgeon stock status for populations upstream of Bonneville Dam was presented in Winter Fact Sheet #1, dated November 13, 2025.

MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES

Columbia River Smelt (Eulachon)

- In September 2023 the states finalized the [2nd edition of the Washington Oregon Eulachon Management Plan](#) (WOEMP) which utilizes three preseason abundance indicators to inform

target harvest rates for commercial and recreational fisheries. The plan also includes in-season triggers that allow managers to alter harvest rates up or down depending on the apparent strength of that year’s run.

- The process from the framework of the WOEMP results in a target harvest rate of 2% for 2026 fisheries (Table 1).
 - P1: The first preseason abundance indicator estimates the mean run size over the previous three years. This year P1 averages the 2023–2025 run size estimates of 17.0 million, 10.4 million, and 7.1 million pounds respectively. This gives a P1 value of 11.5 million pounds for 2026, which is within the 6.0–20.5 million pound range.
 - P2: The second preseason abundance indicator assesses the trend in run sizes over the previous two years and, this year calculates the difference of the 2024 and 2025 run sizes of 10.4 million pounds and 7.1 million pounds, respectively. The resulting value of -3.3 million indicates a decreasing (or negative) trend in run sizes between the previous two years.
 - P3: The third preseason abundance indicator is the trend in forecasted abundance for the upcoming season. The 2026 run is expected to be less than the 10-year average of 8.1 million pounds. Given the expectation of a below average return, this results in a negative forecast for the P3 indicator.

Table 1. Summary of harvest phases. Evaluation of the P1, P2, and P3 preseason abundance indicators inform the selection of the harvest phase and target harvest rate.

Harvest Phase	Harvest Rate	P1 (in millions)		P2	P3
		min	max		
1	1%	-	1.5	--	--
		1.5	5.9	negative	negative
2	2%	1.5	5.9	positive	negative
		1.5	5.9	negative	positive
		6.0	20.5	negative	negative
3	5%	1.5	5.9	positive	positive
		6.0	20.5	positive	negative
		6.0	20.5	negative	positive
4	10%	6.0	20.5	positive	positive
		20.5	+	--	--

- In-season management triggers based on CPUE data collected in the proposed mainstem commercial fishery may result in an upgrade or downgrade to the Harvest Phase.
- A limited Eulachon test fishery directed by WDFW staff in the mainstem Columbia River occurred in 2025. A total of 853 pounds were caught across ten days between February and April. Weekly test fishing will occur in 2026 using gillnets from February through April, up to

14 days depending on the timing of the run. This test fishery will collect biological data to allow staff to further evaluate the Eulachon run.

White Sturgeon

- Management guidelines for sturgeon fisheries upstream of Bonneville Dam were presented in Winter Fact Sheet #1, dated November 13, 2025.

2026 NON-TREATY FISHERIES

Columbia River Commercial Smelt Fisheries

- Mainstem Columbia River commercial landings of Eulachon averaged approximately 12,400 pounds (range 1,726–27,398 pounds) annually between 2020–2024 with an average estimated annual exploitation rate of 0.10% (range 0.01–0.15%). Commercial landings increased to 51,087 pounds during 2025 with an estimated exploitation rate of 0.72%, representing the highest harvest total observed in the commercial fishery since 2014 but still well below the 2025 overall allowable harvest rate.
- Commercial and recreational fisheries during 2025 were upgraded in-season to Harvest Phase 3, after average commercial landings exceeded 400 pounds during three consecutive periods. This allowed for an overall five percent harvest rate.
- Abundance indicators for the 2026 smelt return suggest weaker returns of the age classes that typically contribute the most to adult returns (age-3 and age-4), with greater than normal contributions from the 2021 brood year (age-5). Overall, the 2026 return is expected to continue the downward trend observed since 2023 and likely be lower in magnitude than the 2025 abundance of 7.1 million pounds.
- Due to the expectation of a further decrease in smelt abundance and a higher likelihood of remaining in Harvest Phase 2 throughout the 2026 season, staff are recommending a conservative approach to the commercial fishery. The potential for additional opportunity will be assessed in-season.

<i>Joint Staff Recommendation: 2026 Mainstem Commercial Smelt Fishery</i>	
Season:	Open 5 AM to 5 PM on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from January 12 through February 19 (18 periods). Open 5 AM to 5 PM on Mondays and Thursdays from February 23 through March 19 (8 periods).
Area:	Zones 1-3
Gear:	Gillnet only. Mesh size may not exceed two inches stretch measure. Nets may not exceed 1,500 feet in length along the cork line.
Allowable Sales:	Smelt

Misc. Regulations: Multiple net rule in effect. Nets not specifically authorized for use in this fishery may be onboard the vessel if properly stored. A properly stored net is defined as a net on a drum that is fully covered by a tarp (canvas or plastic) and bound with a minimum of ten revolutions of rope with a diameter of 3/8 (0.375) inches or greater.

24-hour quick reporting required for Washington buyers, pursuant to WAC 220-352-315.

Oregon buyers are required to electronically submit fish receiving tickets pursuant to OAR 635-006-0210. Electronic fish tickets must be submitted within 24 hours of closure of the fishing period, or within 24 hours of landing for fishing periods lasting more than 24 hours.

- The proposed fishery will allow for continued maintenance of the historic index of run strength (pounds/landing) and provide an indication of freshwater abundance to inform tributary recreational fishery management decisions, while providing for commercial harvest opportunity.
- The proposed season structure represents an earlier start date as requested by industry.
- The proposed hours match the longer duration periods requested by industry and were implemented in 2020 to increase the likelihood that a suitable tide will occur within the fishing period.

Tributary Recreational Smelt Fisheries

- During 2020–2024, limited recreational fisheries occurred in the Cowlitz and Sandy rivers. The fisheries were restricted to 1–2 days annually (5–7 hours per day). Annual recreational harvest averaged 81,000 pounds (range 35,000–169,500) with an average exploitation rate of 0.70% (range 0.33–1.01%). The vast majority of the recreational harvest was taken in the Cowlitz River fishery. There was no recreational smelt fishing opportunity in 2018 or 2019.
- On June 6, 2024, a new law went into effect requiring a fishing license when fishing for freshwater smelt in Washington. Current freshwater fishing licenses, including temporary licenses, will be valid. Youth aged 15 years and younger do not need a fishing license. Permanent rules in Oregon require a fishing license to fish for smelt in Oregon waters when open for harvest.
- During March of 2025, WDFW adopted four days of recreational fishing on the Cowlitz River. Despite fish presence confirmed in the mainstem Columbia River, no fish were observed in the Cowlitz River on the days open for harvest and as a result no harvest occurred. No further recreational opportunity was considered in the Cowlitz River due to the need to avoid encounters with out-migrating hatchery salmon and steelhead.
- Eulachon were observed in the Sandy River in late March 2025 and ODFW set a one-day recreational fishery on the Sandy River that occurred on March 27. A total of 75,927 pounds of smelt were harvested, representing an exploitation rate of 1.07%.
- For the 2026 season, WDFW is structuring Cowlitz River recreational smelt fisheries under the same tentative-schedule approach used in 2025. Under this strategy, tentative recreational smelt dipping opportunities will be considered for Wednesdays and Saturdays from February

4 through March 22. Final approval of each date will be announced by WDFW by 3:00 PM on the Friday preceding each week’s tentative dates.

- Feb. 4 and Feb. 7 (approval notice Jan. 30)
- Feb. 11 and Feb. 14 (approval notice Feb. 6)
- Feb. 18 and Feb. 21 (approval notice Feb. 13)
- Feb. 25 and Feb. 28 (approval notice Feb. 20)
- Mar. 4 and Mar. 7 (approval notice Feb. 27)
- Mar. 11 and Mar. 14 (approval notice Mar. 6)
- Mar. 18 and Mar. 21 (approval notice Mar. 13)
- Each week, WDFW will assess landings data from the mainstem Columbia River commercial smelt fishery to determine whether the smelt run size is sufficient to support recreational harvest. While in Harvest Phase 2, a minimum average of 200 pounds per delivery during at least one period is recommended before considering recreational fisheries.
- In the absence of adequate commercial landings data WDFW may use professional judgement to set recreational fisheries.
- The recreational fishery in the Cowlitz River will not be open for all tentative dates, but WDFW expects some opportunity to be approved based on the current run size expectation.
- With respect to recreational smelt fisheries in the Sandy River, ODFW will make the determination if a fishery is to occur based on in-season information.

Zone 6 Recreational White Sturgeon Fisheries

- Given the recent high levels of effort and catch observed on the traditional January 1 start date, as well as unseasonably warm water temperatures during the previous two seasons, the states took action to enact retention closures in Bonneville and The Dalles pools until later this winter when fisheries could be crafted that would project to stay within harvest guidelines.
- Due to the expected lower risk of exceeding the harvest guideline in John Day Pool within a short timeframe, the states maintained the traditional January 1 start date for this fishery.
- Fishery monitoring indicates that effort in the John Day Pool fishery was somewhat higher than average on January 1 then dropped to average levels over the weekend. However, catch rates were about double those typically observed in this fishery during early January. Due to the high catch rates, harvest has accrued more quickly than anticipated preseason.
- Current recreational sturgeon guidelines and harvest estimates for 2026 Zone 6 recreational retention fisheries are summarized below (as of January 6):

Pool	Angler Trips	Harvest	Recreational Guideline	Percent of Guideline
Bonneville	--	--	1,250	--
The Dalles	--	--	275	--
John Day	755	88	105	84%

- Projections indicate that the John Day Pool harvest guideline will be reached soon if action is not taken to close retention. Staff recommend the following action to stay within the harvest

guideline.

<i>Joint Staff Recommendation: 2026 John Day Pool Recreational Sturgeon Fishery</i>
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Effective Saturday, January 10 the retention of sturgeon is prohibited in the mainstem Columbia River from John Day Dam upstream to McNary Dam (John Day Pool) and all adjacent tributaries.
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- The projected kept catch in John Day Pool through Friday, January 9 is 101 fish (96% of the guideline).
- Permanent regulations allow for catch-and-release sturgeon angling all year, except angling for sturgeon is prohibited May 1 through August 31 within the sanctuary areas designated below each of the dam tailraces. Daily and annual sturgeon bag limits apply to all fisheries statewide.

FUTURE MEETINGS

- A Compact/Joint State hearing is scheduled for 10 AM February 11, 2026 via teleconference to consider Select Area commercial salmon fisheries (winter, spring, and summer seasons).
- A Joint State hearing is scheduled for 11:30 AM February 19, 2026 to consider Columbia River recreational spring Chinook fisheries. The hearing will be held at the ODFW Clackamas office (17330 SE Evelyn Street, Clackamas, OR 97015) and a teleconference call-in option will be available.