

Management Strategies for Columbia River Recreational and Commercial Fisheries: 2013 and Beyond

Working Document for Discussion and Consideration by the Columbia River Fishery Management Workgroup

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Background

Columbia River recreational and commercial fisheries are a vital part of the social and economic fabric of Oregon and Washington, providing valuable jobs and economic vitality to rural and urban communities. Optimizing the economic value of both these fisheries within a conservation-based framework that assists recovery of Columbia and Snake River fish species currently listed under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) is a management priority.

Thirteen species of salmon and steelhead are currently listed under the ESA in the Columbia River basin. Limits on the allowable incidental-take of these species (ESA-impacts) significantly constrain access by recreational, commercial and tribal fisheries to hatchery stocks and healthy wild fish runs. There have been a series of adjustments made to commercial and recreational fisheries, including development of additional selective fisheries, to meet conservation responsibilities and provide harvest opportunities. However, perennial conflicts occur between recreational and commercial fishers over how best to manage non-tribal fisheries under these constraints. Conflicts also exist over the use of gill nets in non-tribal mainstem commercial fisheries. These conflicts divide stakeholders and communities and detract from a unified effort to recover fish runs. In this context, further development of fishery strategies is needed to meet the needs of the recreational and commercial fisheries.

As mentioned above, a current strategy for managing non-tribal fisheries consistent with efforts to recover ESA-listed salmon and steelhead and conserve white sturgeon is to make them selective, i.e. deploy gears and techniques and use time and area closures to minimize the catch and/or allow the safe release of imperiled wild fish. Although this strategy is presently used for some fisheries, there are opportunities to expand its use. This strategy also lessens the degree in which limits on the allowable incidental-take of ESA-listed fish species constrain access by fisheries to hatchery stocks and healthy wild fish runs

What follows is a description of the key elements of an alternative management framework for non-tribal Columbia River recreational and commercial fisheries. The framework is intended to enhance the economies of Oregon and Washington as a

whole, ensure the long-term viability of recreational and commercial fisheries and those communities that rely on them, and contribute to fish conservation and recovery. The elements of the framework constitute a comprehensive and cohesive package and are comprised of progressive actions necessary to achieve the desired outcomes. Consequently, the framework should be considered in its entirety when implementing fisheries in the near- and long-terms.

Guiding Principles

1. Continue leadership promoting fish recovery, including improved fish survival through the federal Columbia River hydropower system, improved habitat conditions in the tributaries and estuary, hatchery reform, reduced predation by fish, birds, and marine mammals, and harvest management that meets conservation responsibilities.
2. Continue active management to conserve ESA-listed and weak stocks, and continue to meet terms of *U.S. v. Oregon* management agreements with Columbia River Treaty Tribes.
3. Explore and develop alternative approaches to improve pre-season forecasts of run size and timing, in-season updates of run-size estimates, and in-season estimates of harvest impacts by fishery. Dedicate additional resources and expertise to this task.
4. Enhance the overall economic contribution of non-tribal fisheries to Oregon and Washington and enhance the overall economic viability of commercial and recreational fisheries.
5. Adopt a policy priority for recreational fisheries in the mainstem and commercial fisheries in off-channel areas of the lower Columbia River, addressing salmon and sturgeon fisheries. Toward this end:
 - a) Assign mainstem recreational fisheries a sufficient share of ESA-impacts and harvestable surplus to enhance current fishing opportunity and economic benefit.
 - b) Assign commercial fisheries a sufficient share of the ESA-impacts and harvestable surplus to effectively harvest fish in off-channel areas and harvest surplus fish with selective techniques in the mainstem Columbia River.
6. Phase out the use of non-selective gill nets in non-tribal commercial fisheries in the mainstem Columbia River. Transition gill net use to off-channel areas.
7. Meaningfully enhance off-channel commercial fisheries to provide additional economic benefit and ultimately more fish for commercial harvest, consistent with conservation and fish recovery objectives. Enhancements should include
 - a. Providing additional hatchery fish for release in off-channel areas by shifting currently available production, and where possible providing new production for release in off-channel areas, emphasizing complementary conservation benefits in tributaries.

- b. Expanding existing seasons and boundaries in off-channel areas and/or establishing new off-channel areas, allowing increased harvest in areas where the likelihood of impacting ESA-listed stocks is lower than the mainstem.
8. Develop and implement selective-fishing gear and techniques for commercial mainstem fisheries to optimize conservation and economic benefits when recreational fishery objectives are met.
9. Develop and adopt consistent and concurrent policies between Oregon and Washington related to management of non-tribal Columbia River fisheries, as well as the sharing of investments and benefits.

Approach

The approach to developing and implementing an alternative management framework for non-tribal Columbia River recreational and commercial fisheries described below incorporates concepts in Oregon Governor Kitzhaber's proposal (as described in letters to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission dated August 9 and August 14, 2012 and in a document released on September 20, 2012 in response to questions by various stakeholders). It also incorporates additional details developed by Oregon and Washington staff and refined through the deliberative process conducted by the Columbia River Fishery Management Workgroup. The final approach will be determined by the respective Fish and Wildlife Commissions in Oregon and Washington.

To avoid significant economic harm to the commercial fishery, the approach to phasing out the use of non-selective gill nets in mainstem Columbia River commercial fisheries would include a transition period. The intent is to complete the transition by the end of 2016, although the period may be extended by one year if circumstances warrant it. During this period, the use of gill nets would be allowed in the mainstem as evaluation of alternative gear continues, strategies to further access harvestable surplus in the mainstem are developed, and additional hatchery fish are released in off-channel areas. To help lessen economic impacts on commercial fisheries during the transition, only a partial shift toward a higher mainstem priority for recreational fisheries would occur. The transition period would span the time needed for returns on new investments in off-channel areas, for evaluation and implementation of alternative selective fishing methods, and for evaluation of economic objectives for commercial fisheries under the alternative management framework. This period would also provide opportunities to secure political support and additional resources (i.e., money, infrastructure, and fish) and adopt statutes necessary for the long-term implementation of this management framework.

1. Transition period (2013-2016)

- a. A fixed framework would be used to assign shares of ESA-impacts and harvestable surplus to each of the Columbia River non-tribal fisheries. Within

this framework, shares would be assigned to each non-tribal fishery as follows:

- 1) Spring Chinook: Assign 70% of the ESA-impact for upriver spring Chinook stocks to mainstem recreational fisheries (current share is 60% under “base case”). Assign the balance (30%) to off-channel and mainstem commercial fisheries.
- 2) Summer Chinook: Assign 70% of the harvestable surplus available for use downstream from Priest Rapids Dam to mainstem recreational fisheries (current share is 50%). Assign the balance (30%) to mainstem commercial fisheries.
- 3) Sockeye: Assign 70% of the ESA-impact for Snake River sockeye to mainstem recreational fisheries (current share is 50%). Assign the balance (30%) to mainstem commercial fisheries for incidental harvest of sockeye in Chinook-directed fisheries. If NOAA Fisheries increases the allowable ESA-impact for Snake River sockeye, provide opportunities for increased commercial harvest using selective gear if developed and practical.
- 4) Tule Fall Chinook: Assign no more than 70% of the ESA-impact for lower Columbia River tule fall Chinook to mainstem recreational fisheries to meet management objectives (current share is approximately 50%). Assign the balance (not less than 30%) to off-channel commercial fisheries, mainstem commercial fisheries that target Upriver Bright fall Chinook, and, if selective gear is developed during the transition period, mainstem commercial fisheries that harvest Washington Lower River Hatchery Chinook to help reduce strays, consistent with the Washington Commission Hatchery and Fishery Reform Policy.
- 5) Upriver Bright Fall Chinook: Assign no more than 70% of the ESA-impact for Snake River Wild fall Chinook to mainstem recreational fisheries to meet management objectives (current share is approximately 50%). Assign the balance (not less than 30%) to off-channel and mainstem commercial fisheries. Establish reasonable recreational fisheries objectives that reflect a modest increase in the priority for mainstem recreational fisheries (Appendix A). As per 1c (below), provide additional mainstem commercial harvest when recreational fishery objectives are expected to be met. The focus of mainstem commercial fisheries would be to harvest Upriver Bright fall Chinook in the area upstream of the Lewis River where the incidental take of lower river tule fall Chinook is reduced and in the area downstream from the Lewis River as alternative selective gear is developed.

- 6) Coho: Assign commercial fisheries a sufficient share of the ESA-impact for Lower Columbia Natural coho to implement off-channel coho and fall Chinook fisheries and mainstem fall Chinook fisheries. Assign the balance to in-river mainstem recreational fisheries (currently in-river mainstem recreational fisheries are assigned a sufficient share of the allowable incidental-take of ESA-listed coho to meet fishery objectives). If these fisheries are unable to use all of the ESA-impact for Lower Columbia Natural coho, assign the remainder to mainstem commercial coho fisheries. As selective techniques and alternative gear are developed, additional commercial mainstem coho fisheries will be provided with an emphasis on harvesting hatchery coho in October when wild coho are less abundant.
 - 7) Chum: Continue practice of no target chum fisheries. Assign commercial fisheries a sufficient share of the ESA-impact for chum to implement off-channel and mainstem fisheries targeting other salmon species (retention in recreational fisheries is currently prohibited).
 - 8) White Sturgeon: Allocate 90% of the harvestable surplus for use in non-tribal fisheries and hold 10% in reserve as an additional conservation buffer above the maximum harvest rate allowed in Oregon's white sturgeon conservation plan. Assign 80% of the white sturgeon available for harvest to the recreational fishery (current share is 80%). Assign the balance (20%) to off-channel and mainstem commercial fisheries.
- b. Alternative selective gear will be used for the non-tribal mainstem commercial fisheries referenced above (Section 1a). If alternative selective gear is not available and practical, based on administrative, biological or economic factors, the use of gill nets in these fisheries will be allowed during the transition period.
 - c. Under the following conditions, opportunities for additional mainstem commercial fishing may be provided during the transition period using alternative selective gear, or gill nets if alternative selective gear is not available and practical. This approach is expected to provide substantive additional mainstem commercial fishing opportunities during the interim for Upriver Bright fall Chinook.
 - 1) If mainstem recreational fisheries are unable to fully use their shares of ESA-impacts or harvestable surplus.
 - 2) If the goals for mainstem recreational fisheries are expected to be met.

- d. The following actions will take place during the transition period to enhance harvest levels and opportunities for commercial fisheries in off-channel sites (see Appendix B for details):
- 1) Enhanced hatchery production at existing off-channel sites:
 - a) *Spring Chinook*: The number of juvenile spring Chinook acclimated for release at off-channel sites will be enhanced by approximately 1,000,000 fish annually (current releases are approximately 1.2M, including a 250,000 increase by Oregon beginning in 2010). The increase in 2010 was a result of Commission direction in 2008 and adults from those releases began returning in 2012. Oregon will acclimate an additional 500,000 juvenile spring Chinook annually for release beginning in 2013. Washington will pursue funding to acclimate an additional 200,000 to 250,000 juvenile spring Chinook annually.
 - b) *Coho*: The number of juvenile coho acclimated for release at off-channel sites will be enhanced by approximately 900,000 fish annually (current releases are approximately 4M, including a 120,000 increase by Oregon beginning in 2010). Oregon will acclimate an additional 600,000 juvenile coho annually for release beginning in 2013. Washington will acclimate an additional 200,000 juvenile coho annually beginning in 2013.
 - c) *Select Area Bright Fall Chinook*: To offset reductions in mainstem commercial harvest of summer Chinook, Oregon will rear an additional 500,000 juvenile Select Area Bright fall Chinook annually for release at off-channel sites (current releases are approximately 1.5M). These releases should begin in 2013, if broodstock can be collected during fall 2012.
 - 2) Expanding existing off-channel sites: Oregon will seek funding to evaluate the feasibility of providing more commercial fishing opportunity and more commercially fishable area at existing off-channel sites. In the long-term, the proportion of overall impacts allocated to off-channel areas is expected to be approximately double (20%) what it is now (10%) in order to accommodate expanded and new sites.
 - 3) New off-channel sites: Oregon and Washington will seek funding to evaluate the feasibility of establishing new off-channel sites consistent with the expected long-term allocation of impacts described above.

- e. Reporting requirements for lost and derelict commercial fishing nets will be consistent between Oregon and Washington, and will align with the current policy in Washington.
- f. Using the model results in Appendix C, the ex-vessel value for commercial fisheries (mainstem plus off-channel) during the transition period would be reduced. For recreational fisheries, however, the number of angler trips would increase.

2. Long Term (Beyond 2016)

- a. A fixed framework will be used to assign shares of ESA-impacts and harvestable surplus to each of the Columbia River non-tribal fisheries. The shares assigned to off-channel commercial fisheries will be secured by holding them harmless from pre-season buffers. This will assist fish recovery by reducing the opportunity for hatchery fish to stray into lower Columbia River tributaries and will maximize the economic value of the harvest. Within this framework, shares will be assigned to each non-tribal fishery as follows:
 - 1) Spring and Summer Chinook: Assign 80% of ESA-impacts and harvestable surplus to mainstem recreational fisheries to meet management objectives and the balance (20%) to commercial fisheries.
 - 2) Sockeye: Assign approximately 80% of the ESA-impact for Snake River sockeye to mainstem recreational fisheries to meet management objectives and the balance (approximately 20%) to mainstem commercial fisheries for incidental harvest of sockeye in Chinook-directed fisheries. If NOAA Fisheries increases the allowable take of ESA-listed Snake River sockeye, provide for increased commercial harvest using selective gear if developed and practical.
 - 3) Tule Fall Chinook: Assign no more than 80% of the ESA-impact for lower Columbia River tule fall Chinook to mainstem recreational fisheries to meet management objectives (Appendix A). Assign the balance (not less than 20%) to off-channel commercial fisheries, mainstem commercial fisheries that target Upriver Bright fall Chinook, and mainstem commercial fisheries that harvest Washington Lower River Hatchery Chinook with selective gear to help reduce strays, consistent with the Washington Commission Hatchery and Fishery Reform Policy.
 - 4) Upriver Bright Fall Chinook: Assign no more than 80% of the ESA-impact for Snake River Wild fall Chinook to mainstem recreational fisheries to meet management objectives (Appendix A). Assign the balance (not less than 20%) to off-channel and mainstem commercial fisheries. The focus of mainstem commercial fisheries would be to target Upriver Bright fall

Chinook in the area upstream of the Lewis River where the incidental take of lower river tule Chinook is reduced and to harvest Upriver Bright fall Chinook in the area downstream from the Lewis River in selective fisheries that target Washington Lower River Hatchery Chinook and coho.

- 5) Coho: Assign commercial fisheries a sufficient share of the ESA-impact for Lower Columbia Natural coho to implement off-channel coho and fall Chinook fisheries and mainstem fall Chinook fisheries. Assign the balance to in-river mainstem recreational fisheries. If these fisheries are unable to use all of the ESA-impact for Lower Columbia Natural coho, assign the remainder to mainstem commercial coho fisheries. As per 2b (below), it is expected that substantive new selective mainstem commercial fisheries will be available for hatchery coho, particularly in October.
 - 6) Chum: Continue practice of no target chum fisheries. Assign commercial fisheries a sufficient share of the ESA-impact for chum to implement off-channel and mainstem fisheries targeting other salmon species (retention in recreational fisheries is currently prohibited).
 - 7) White Sturgeon: Allocate 90% of the harvestable surplus for use in non-tribal fisheries and hold 10% in reserve as an additional conservation buffer above the maximum harvest rate allowed in Oregon's white sturgeon conservation plan. Assign 80% of the white sturgeon available for harvest to the recreational fishery. Assign the balance (20%) to off-channel and mainstem commercial fisheries.
- b. Non-tribal mainstem commercial fisheries will be restricted to the use of selective gear and fishing techniques. As during the transition period, opportunities for additional mainstem commercial fishing may be provided as described below. This approach is expected to provide substantive mainstem commercial opportunities in the long-term for Upriver Bright fall Chinook, lower river hatchery fall Chinook and hatchery coho.
- 1) If mainstem recreational fisheries are unable to fully use their shares of ESA-impacts or harvestable surplus.
 - 2) If the goals for mainstem recreational fisheries are expected to be met.
- c. Efforts to enhance economic benefits for off-channel commercial fisheries will continue, based on available funding, by (see Appendix B for details):
- 1) Investing in major capital improvements at existing off-channel sites in Oregon, which would enable the rearing or acclimation of an additional 1,250,000 juvenile spring Chinook, 750,000 juvenile Select Area Bright fall

Chinook, and 4,700,000 juvenile coho annually (these numbers include the additional production put in place during the transition period).

- 2) Investing in the infra-structure and fish rearing and acclimation operations necessary to establish new off-channel sites in Oregon and/or Washington, as identified by evaluations completed during the transition period.
- d. Using the model results in Appendix C, the ex-vessel value for commercial fisheries (mainstem plus off-channel) would not be reduced in the long term. For recreational fisheries, however, the number of angler trips would increase.

Management of non-tribal fisheries will be adaptive and adjustments may be made if certain triggers occur (e.g. modify how fish are shared among fisheries and how mainstem fisheries are managed). These triggers would come into play if key assumptions necessary to achieve the desired outcomes for recreational and commercial fisheries and conservation prove to be inaccurate or untrue. Efforts would then determine why the assumptions were flawed and identify actions necessary to correct course. Correcting course, however, does not mean dismantling the foundations of this alternative management framework or removing its key elements described above. These elements constitute a cohesive package and actions necessary to achieve the desired outcomes. In this context, the triggers may include:

- 1) Significantly lower than expected returns of harvestable fish to off-channel sites.
- 2) Insufficient space within off-channel sites to accommodate the commercial fleet.
- 3) Significantly lower than expected catches using selective gears.
- 4) Biological, fiscal or legal circumstances that delay or preclude implementation of alternative gear and additional off-channel hatchery investments.
- 5) Significantly lower than expected economic return to commercial fishers.
- 6) Conflicts with terms of *U.S. v Oregon* management agreements with Tribes.
- 7) Failure to meet conservation needs, e.g. reducing the proportion of hatchery fish on spawning grounds.