2012 Spring Chinook and Sturgeon Seasons Announced

Local News

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PORTLAND – Fishery managers from Washington and Oregon today set fishing seasons for 2012 on the lower Columbia River that anticipate a strong run of spring chinook salmon but a further decline in the number of white sturgeon available for harvest.

Most new fishing regulations adopted today will take effect March 1, when fishing for spring chinook and sturgeon starts to heat up on the lower Columbia. Until then, both fisheries are open on various sections of the river under rules approved last year.

This year’s spring chinook season is based on a projected return of 314,200 upriver fish to the Columbia River, which would be the fourth-largest on record. The sport fishery approved today is scheduled to run through April 6, but could be extended if enough fish are available for harvest.

Harvest guidelines adopted by the two states will allow anglers fishing below Bonneville Dam to catch and keep up to 14,500 hatchery-reared spring chinook before the run forecast is updated in May. Upriver fish bound for rivers above the dam are expected to make up the majority of the catch, but salmon returning to the Cowlitz, Lewis, Willamette and other rivers below Bonneville also contribute to the fishery.Page 1 : 2012 Spring Chinook and Sturgeon Seasons Announced
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As in years past, only hatchery-reared spring chinook marked with a clipped adipose fin may be retained. Any unmarked wild spring chinook must be released unharmed.

Cindy LeFleur, Columbia River policy manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), said this year’s spring chinook fishery looks promising, especially compared to last season.

“Not only is the run forecast well above average, but fishing conditions should be a lot better than last year when anglers had to contend with weeks of high, turbid water,” LeFleur said.

But tighter catch guidelines for white sturgeon on the lower Columbia River will reduce fishing opportunities for that species for the third straight year. Responding to the continued decline of sturgeon abundance below Bonneville Dam in recent years, the two states adopted fishing regulations designed to reduce the catch by another 38 percent this year.

“This year’s sturgeon fishery will be opening later or closing earlier on various sections of the river,” LeFleur said. “Anglers should check this year’s fishing rules carefully before they head out.”

The new fishing regulations for white sturgeon and spring chinook salmon will be posted on WDFW’s website at http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/regulations/ by the end of the day Jan. 27.

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Spring chinook fishing is currently open to boat and bank anglers on a daily basis from Buoy 10 near the mouth of the Columbia River upstream to the Interstate 5 bridge. Under the new rules adopted

today, the sport fishery will expand upriver to Beacon Rock from March 1 through April 6. During that period, the sport fishery will close on three Tuesdays – March 20, March 27 and April 3 – to accommodate commercial fisheries.
Starting March 1, bank anglers will also be allowed to fish from Beacon Rock up to the fishing boundary below Bonneville Dam.
Above Bonneville Dam, the fishery will be open to boat and bank anglers on a daily basis from March 16 through May 2 between the Tower Island powerlines six miles below The Dalles Dam and the Washington/Oregon state line, 17 miles upriver from McNary Dam. Bank anglers can also fish from Bonneville Dam upriver to the powerlines during that time.
Starting March 1, anglers fishing downriver from Bonneville Dam may retain one marked, hatchery-reared adult spring chinook as part of their daily catch limit. Above the dam, anglers can keep two marked adult spring chinook per day effective March 16.
This year’s forecast of 314,200 upriver spring chinook is up significantly from 2011, when 198,400 upriver fish were projected to enter the Columbia River. Although last year’s run exceeded that forecast, extremely high water conditions put a damper on catch rates for much of the season.
To guard against overestimating this year’s run, the states will again manage the fisheries with a 30 percent buffer until the forecast is updated in late April or early May.
Fishery managers from Washington and Oregon have already scheduled a meeting April 5 to review the catch and determine if the season can be extended. If the catch to that point has not reached the initial harvest guideline, the two states will consider an immediate extension, said LeFleur, the WDFW fishery manager.
“We’ve agreed to take a conservative approach until May, when we typically know how many fish are actually returning,” Le Fleur said. “If the fish return at or above expectations, we will look toward providing additional days of fishing on the river later in the spring.”

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New harvest guidelines approved for sturgeon fisheries in the lower Columbia River will limit this year’s catch to 9,600, a 38 percent reduction from last year. That action follows a 30 percent catch reduction in 2011 and a 40 percent reduction in 2010.
Monitoring data jointly collected by Washington and Oregon indicate that the abundance of legal-size white sturgeon has declined by nearly 50 percent since 2003. Factors often cited for the decline include increased predation by sea lions and a drop in the abundance of smelt and lamprey, which contribute to sturgeons’ diet.
To keep this year’s catch within the new harvest guideline, the sturgeon fishery will end 23 days earlier than last year in the estuary below the Wauna powerlines and start eight days later in the fall from the powerlines upriver to Bonneville Dam. Fishing seasons approved for 2012 in the lower Columbia River are as follows:

· Buoy 10 to the Wauna powerlines: Retention of white sturgeon is allowed daily from Jan. 1 through April 30 and from May 12 through July 8. From Jan. 1 through April 30, sturgeon must measure between 38 inches and 54 inches (fork length) to be retained. From May 12 through the end of the season they must measure 41 inches to 54 inches (fork length) to be retained.
Catch-and-release fishing is allowed on days when retention is prohibited.

· Wauna powerlines to Bonneville Dam: Retention of white sturgeon is allowed three days per week (Thursday through Saturday) from Jan. 1 through July 31 and from Oct. 20 through Dec. 31.

Sturgeon must measure between 38 inches and 54 inches (fork length) to be retained.
Catch-and-release fishing is allowed on days when retention is prohibited.

All fishing for sturgeon will be closed from May 1 through Aug. 31 in the sturgeon sanctuary downriver from Bonneville Dam described in the Fishing in Washington rules pamphlet. Sand Island Slough near Rooster Rock also will be closed to fishing at least through April 30.
As in years past, 80 percent of the allowable catch will be allocated to the sport fishery and 20 percent to the commercial fishery. Under the new harvest rate, the portion of the catch available to recreational fisheries will be allocated as follows: up to 4,160 fish in the estuary, up to 2,080 above Wauna and between 1,768 and 2,022 in the Willamette River.
The harvest share between recreational fisheries upstream and downstream from the Wauna power lines will be flexible and may be adjusted in-season to meet the states’ expectations for fishing seasons and ensure the harvest rate does not exceed area catch guidelines.
Unlike the lower river, legal-size sturgeon populations appear to be growing above Bonneville Dam, said Brad James, a WDFW fish biologist. This year’s harvest guidelines for sturgeon fisheries above the dam have not yet been determined.