

Fishing closures in Columbia River Basin focus on protecting upriver chinook stocks

Local News

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Posted on : May 18, 2009 at 6:11 am

OLYMPIA - Fishing is now closed for salmon and steelhead on the Columbia River, but anglers are catching an increasing number of both species on tributaries flowing into the big river from Longview to Yakima. Those fisheries remain open because they have no measurable impact on wild upriver spring chinook salmon, say state fishery managers, who have recently cut short fisheries on the Columbia and Snake rivers to further protect wild stocks listed under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). Those actions were prompted by unexpectedly low counts of spring chinook moving up the fish ladders at Bonneville Dam. Fishery managers are now expecting about half of the nearly 300,000 predicted spring chinook to actually return this year.

"Conservation is our highest priority, and we must take action to ensure adequate protection of these ESA listed wild fish when returns fall short of expectations," said Guy Norman, southwest region director for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW). "We have worked closely with Oregon managers over the past two weeks to delay scheduled fisheries and enact emergency closures of on-going fisheries. We have also carefully assessed which fisheries can continue as planned without affecting the fish in need of protection." For example, Norman said sport and commercial fisheries will be allowed to continue in several bays and side channels off the main channel of the Columbia River estuary where wild upriver chinook are rarely encountered. Boundaries for commercial fishing in these Select Areas Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) areas have been changed to further reduce the chance of encountering an upriver destined chinook. In other areas, WDFW has provided fishing opportunities on rivers where hatchery fish are returning in high numbers. Norman noted that catch limits for early returning "jack" salmon were recently increased on Wind River and Drano Lake where returns of those fish have exceeded expectations. But fishery managers in Washington and Oregon have action to curtail fisheries that do have an impact on upriver chinook stocks. Just this week, the two states delayed a hatchery steelhead fishery set to begin May 16 in the lower Columbia River because of expected mortality rates on chinook salmon hooked by anglers fishing for steelhead. Washington managers have also enacted early closures to Eastern Washington spring chinook fisheries in the Columbia River and the lower Snake River. The steelhead fishery could be delayed for as much as a month, unless returns of upriver spring chinook pick up, said Cindy LeFleur, WDFW Columbia River policy coordinator. "It's disappointing that we have to cut short the eastern Washington Chinook fisheries and delay the steelhead fishery, but we need to do everything we can to conserve wild chinook salmon still in the river," she said. Current information about fishing opportunities in the Columbia River Basin is available on the WDFW website (<http://wdfw.wa.gov/fish/regions/reg5/hotline.htm>) or by calling the Fishing Hotline (360-696-6211).