

Illegal fishing, dry weather conditions threaten fish across the state

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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OLYMPIA - Despite recent showers, the summer's prolonged dry weather has left fish vulnerable, including on the Dungeness River, where two anglers were recently caught poaching. An enforcement officer with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) cited the anglers for multiple fishing violations, including possession of federally protected wild chinook salmon.

The Dungeness River, which flows through Clallam County to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, is closed to all fishing to protect returning wild chinook, listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

"These people may not know it, but the two fish they caught represent 10 percent of the wild chinook that have returned so far to the Dungeness, which has also suffered from low flows this summer," said WDFW Sergeant Phillip Henry. "Taking one of these fish is like shooting a bald eagle." Henry said fines for the offenses could add up for the poachers. Fishing in closed waters carries a maximum penalty of \$1,000 and/or 30 days in jail. The maximum penalty for snagging alone is \$5,000 and/or a year in jail. Snagging is an attempt to take fish with a hook and line in such a way that the fish does not voluntarily take the bait in its mouth. In addition, the two may face federal charges for taking protected fish.

WDFW is also stepping up enforcement patrols on other rivers in the state during the summer's peak season, Henry said. On a recent patrol of the Skokomish River in Mason County, WDFW enforcement officers issued more than 50 citations for a variety of violations, including snagging, over-limits and fishing without a license.

"Poaching is an annual issue, but with most of Washington experiencing the hottest and driest summer in years, low water levels are making fish more vulnerable to snagging and other illegal activities," Henry said. "We appreciate that most anglers follow the rules and hope others will act responsibly as well."

Henry asks that anyone who witnesses poaching violations to call WDFW's confidential toll-free Poaching Hotline at (877) 933-9847.

The same weather conditions are causing additional problems for fish in other parts of the state. Low flows and elevated water temperatures forced the early closure of salmon fishing on Lake Wenatchee, where returning sockeye were experiencing high mortality rates.

At the Fallert Creek Hatchery on the Kalama River, where surface water temperatures were elevated during the state's recent heat wave, about 135,000 summer and winter steelhead - 96 percent of the facility's steelhead - died after being infected by a parasite that grows rapidly in warm water. Elsewhere, about 200,000 coho salmon - 12 percent of the coho at the Washougal Hatchery - died from a bacterial infection after water temperatures reached 80 degrees at the facility.

Rock dams built by campers to create swimming areas in streams, also pose real problems for salmon and other migrating fish at this time of year, said Perry Harvester, a WDFW fish biologist. Each year, WDFW staff dismantles dozens of these so-called "recreational dams," which can block passage to salmon, steelhead and bulltrout moving upstream to spawn, Harvester said. In Yakima

County, where Harvester is based, the problem is especially acute near campgrounds on Rattlesnake and Crow creeks, and the Teanaway River, American River, and the Little Naches River. "It may seem like innocent fun, but building these makeshift dams can put entire runs of protected fish at risk especially during late summer when many fish begin their spawning runs," he said. "It may be one reason why we've seen declining redd (egg-nest) counts for ESA-listed bull trout in some of these streams in recent years.

Harvester noted that building an unauthorized dam of any sort across a river or stream is a violation of the state hydraulics law, which is a gross misdemeanor.