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Chinook gillnet season starts June 17

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Rejecting pleas from sportsmen, Washington and Oregon officials have decided to allow gillnetting for summer chinook in most of the lower Columbia River starting on June 17, just two days after recreational fishing opens.

The Columbia River Compact on Thursday adopted two commercial periods from 7 p.m. Thursday to 5 a.m. June 18 upstream to the Interstate 205 Bridge and 7 p.m. June 22 to 5 a.m. June 23 from the ocean to Beacon Rock.

John North of the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife said the commercial fleet is projected to catch 2,000 to 2,500 summer chinook in the first period and 1,200 to 1,800 in the second.

The sport and commercial sides on the lower Columbia River each get a harvest of 5,450 summer chinook from a run predicted to be 88,800, the best since 2002.

Sport fishing for summer chinook opens Wednesday, the first salmon fishing in the lower Columbia since spring chinook season closed on April 18.

This year only fin-clipped, hatchery-origin chinook can be kept, but the season is expected to last through July 31 compared to 16 days a year ago.

Liz Hamilton, executive director of the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association, said enthusiasm is high for the summer chinook opener.

She asked that the gillnet season not start until at least dusk on June 20, allowing five days of angling before the nets are in the Columbia.

Starting commercial fishing two days after the sport opener "snaps defeat out of the jaws of victory," Hamilton said.

Ed Wickersham, government relations chair for the Coastal Conservation Association, also called for starting gillnetting on June 20.

"Recreational fishing can be robust and successful with little impact on the gillnet fishery," he said. "The inverse is not true."

While sportsmen will release wild summer chinook, the commercial fishery can keep both hatchery and wild fish.

Wickersham called for a commercial fishery with daylight hours, short soak times and recovery boxes to revive steelhead and sockeye handled as bycatch.

Tim Heuker, a Dodson, Ore., commercial fisherman, said with the tribal fishery upstream of Bonneville Dam opening June 16, non-Indian fishermen need to get their catch to market quickly before the price drops.

Thursday's compact meeting included plenty of sparring between the sport and commercial camps.

"I'd respect them (sportsmen) if they'd just say they want us off the river," said Darren Crookshanks, president of the Columbia River Fisheries Protective Union, a commercial group.

Jim Wells of Salmon For All, also a commercial group, said having a sport season on summer chinook when only 60 percent of the fish are fin-clipped is "terrible."

John McKinley, a Wahkiakum County commercial fisherman, said the sport groups are "hiding under the flag of conservation trying to get (a better) allocation."

"This waiting around for the sport fishery to go is a crock," he added.

Tribal season — Treaty Indian fishermen in the Bonneville, The Dalles, and John Day pools will fish from 6 a.m. Wednesday to 6 p.m. June 18 and 6 a.m. June 22 to 6 p.m. June 24.

Stuart Ellis, a biologist for the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, estimated the catch will be about 7,000 to 9,000 summer chinook and 3,500 to 4,500 sockeye.

At a run of 88,800, the treaty tribes get to harvest 25,500 summer chinook and 8,750 sockeye under the 2008-2017 Columbia River Management Agreement.