

**Petition- Amend and Repeal 2023-2024 Winter Steelhead Season
on the Olympic Peninsula – (Decision)**

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Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date:

1/26/2024

Agenda item:

Petition- Amend and Repeal 2023-2024 Winter Steelhead Season on the Olympic Peninsula

Presenter(s):

James Losee, Region 6 Fish Program Manager

Background summary:

On November 29th, 2023 WDFW received a petition (attached) requesting that the commission repeal the existing rule established on November 30th 2023 in the coastal region from the Quillayute River south to Willapa Bay. The petitioner is requesting the regulation be changed to prohibit all steelhead angling from December 1, 2023 through February 15, 2024.

Status of the Resource

Numerous large watersheds and small tributaries on the Washington Coast support wild steelhead, all of which have exhibited long term declines in runsize (Figure 1). Permanent rules in these areas are diverse but allow fishing from December 1 through April 15th and permit the use of bait and fishing from a boat in most areas. In response to the decline in wild steelhead abundance, Region 6 has relied on emergency regulations informed by pre-season predictions of wild steelhead abundance and an extensive public process to ensure that management objectives are met, consistent with the Statewide Steelhead Management Plan.

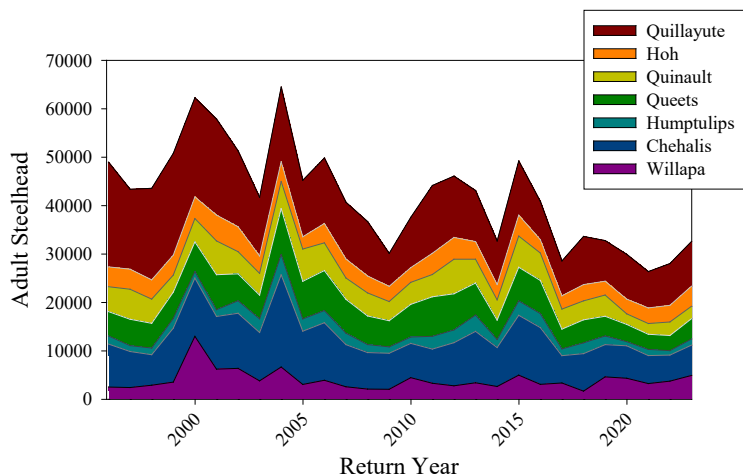


Figure 1. Stacked trend lines of runsize for wild steelhead returning to the 7 major systems on the Washington coast.

Rational for Current Regulation

WDFW staff analyzed numerous fishery proposals received from the public in writing, at town hall events and through a comment portal created online with the objective of designing fishing regulations that meet objectives outlined in the Statewide Steelhead Management Plan. The results of this work lead to a set of sport fishing regulations that provides meaningful fishing opportunity in three of the seven systems and full closures in the remaining four due to low abundance, lack of monitoring and failure to reach agreement on fishing plans with tribal comanagers. In the Quillayute and Hoh Rivers and tributaries of Willapa Bay, where steelhead fishing is open, regulations were designed to ensure management objectives associated with abundance, diversity, distribution and productivity are met. Additionally, intensive creel monitoring has been put in place in these areas to monitor fishing effort and catch in-season. Specifically, fishing is open for catch and release of wild steelhead and harvest of two hatchery steelhead in these areas from December 1 through March 31 with restrictions on fishing from a boat in select areas of the Quillayute and Hoh watersheds and restrictions on the use of bait in all waters to limit catch of wild steelhead. Closures in April in all coastal watersheds are expected to further limit total encounters and add protection for steelhead kelts on their migration to the marine environment. By limiting impacts overall, managing impacts consistently throughout the early and late portions of the run and closing in April to protect steelhead kelts these regulations support diverse run timings, spawner abundance goals and productivity targets and are supported by tribal comanagers in the coastal region.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the treaty tribes of the North Coast (Quileute, Hoh, and Quinault) share the responsibility of managing the fish resources and their respective fisheries to provide for spawning escapements that meet or exceed goals. At the time of adoption by the commission, WDFW and the comanagers had shared conservation concerns for steelhead in coastal systems and agreed to emergency fishing rules that would support long term sustainability or full closures. This pre-season planning process also included two town hall meetings and extensive communication with the public through emails, phone calls and a public comment portal online.

Staff Recommendation:

Deny the petition. This recommendation is based on the work that was done by agency staff to design the current regulations that are expected to meet management objectives described in the Statewide Steelhead Management Plan. The current regulations are expected to provide protection for wild populations of steelhead by reducing encounters and providing increased conservation by WDFW and the comanagers beyond what is provided by the permanent rules.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

Management of recreational fisheries for hatchery and wild steelhead throughout Washington is complex and must address conservation and population rebuilding needs in various waters statewide as well as providing fishing opportunities that meet conservation objectives.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

None

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

As this is a rule-making petition, no public engagement has occurred associated with this petition to date. However, an extensive public process was conducted that lead to the emergency rules put in place.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Department staff recommend the Commission deny the petition and direct staff to manage fisheries consistent with comanager agreed to steelhead harvest management plans for the 2023/24 season. Adoption of this petition/rule would result in an unnecessary reduction in fishing opportunity and provide limited protection for wild steelhead while resulting in reduced catch of hatchery origin steelhead returning during this time period.

Draft motion language:

Recommended Motion: "I move to deny the petition and direct staff to manage consistent with emergency rules in place."

Is there a "second"?

If so, then motion maker states the basis for the motion; other Commissioners discuss views on motion; amendments, if any, proposed and addressed.

Post decision communications plan:

Commission staff will provide a letter to the petitioners with the outcome of the Commission decision regarding the petition.
