

## WASHINGTON STATE SURF SMELT FACT SHEET

NAME: Surf smelt, *Hypomesus pretiosus* (Girard 1855).



### GEOGRAPHIC RANGE:

Long Beach, California to Chignik Lagoon, Alaska. The Asian subspecies, *Hypomesus pretiosus japonicus*, occurs in the northwest Pacific Ocean.

### RELATED SPECIES:

Several members of the smelt family, Osmeridae, occur in Washington waters, including eulachon (Columbia River smelt, hooligan) *Thaleichthys pacificus*, longfin smelt *Spirinchus thaleichthys*, whitebait smelt *Allosmerus elongatus*, and night smelt *Spirinchus starksi*. Unlike the other species, both eulachon and longfin smelt are anadromous, migrating into streams in the winter to spawn. **Note:** Columbia River smelt (eulachon) are listed as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and recreational fishing for this species in Washington waters is limited to years in which the run size is exceptionally large. Be sure to check the recreational fishing regulations (<http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/regulations/>) before attempting to fish for any smelt species.

### RECOGNITION:

Characteristic dark stripe down the middle of the side of the body. Also notable for small mouth with maxillary (upper jaw bone) that does not extend past the midpoint of the pupil of the eye; dorsal fin begins in front of the pelvic fin; pelvic fins short; and small, curved adipose fin. Length up to eight inches.

### LOCAL DISTRIBUTION:

Surf smelt occur abundantly throughout the nearshore marine waters of Washington, from the Columbia River to the Canadian border and into southernmost Puget Sound and Hood Canal. Genetic research suggests that, despite this broad distribution, surf smelt throughout Puget Sound represent a single stock.

### SPAWN TIMING:

Surf smelt populations can generally be divided into summer spawners and fall/winter spawners, though year-round spawning has been documented in the Whidbey Basin, Port Susan, portions of the San Juan Islands, and central Puget Sound (Eagle Harbor and Sinclair Inlet). Spawning occurs along the central outer coast of Washington (i.e., from the Quillayute River to just south of the Quinault River) from January through October. Spawning generally occurs in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, northern Saratoga Pass, Birch Point, and Cherry Point from May to October. Spawning occurs from at least July to April in the Bremerton-Poulsbo area, southernmost Puget Sound, and southern Hood Canal. Currently, about 259 lineal statute miles of Washington State shoreline are documented surf smelt spawning beach.

### LIFE HISTORY:

Surf smelt are generally an abundant, schooling forage fish living to a maximum age of about five years. Many spawn at one year of age; the majority by two years of age. Adults do not apparently die after spawning. Ecologically, surf smelt fill much the same role as herring and other local forage fishes in marine food webs. They are schooling plankton feeders that are, in turn, preyed upon by a host of other species. Spawning habitat is a mixture of coarse sand and fine gravel in the upper intertidal zone. Spawn is adhesive to particles of beach material and incubates from two to five weeks depending upon seasonal temperature. Juvenile smelt rear in nearshore areas. Surf smelt do not appear to form large schools in open water in Puget Sound. This, combined with their extended spawning season and the small-scale patchiness of their spawn deposition, makes it difficult to assess abundance using acoustic/trawl and spawn deposition survey techniques used for assessment of Puget Sound herring.

### FISHERIES:

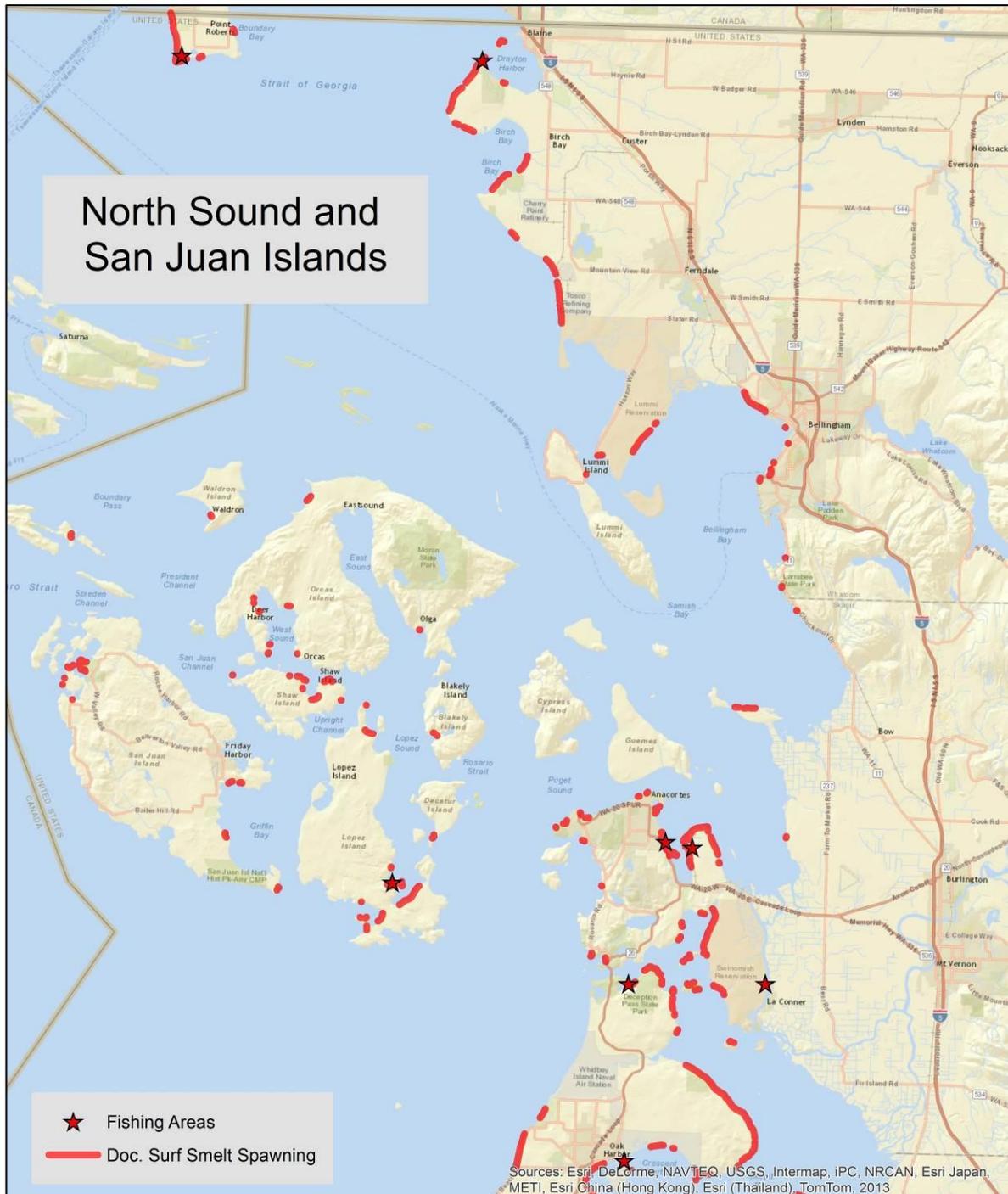
Unlike other local forage fish species, the surf smelt also supports significant human-consumption fisheries in many areas of Washington State. Surf smelt are fished commercially with beach seines with average annual landings of 95,000 pounds since 2000 in Puget Sound, most of which are harvested in central Puget Sound. A similar annual poundage is currently assumed to be taken by sportsmen with various designs of long-handled dip nets and hook and line jig gear, though this fishery is not actively monitored. Beginning in 2014, the commercial fishery was limited to an annual harvest quota of 60,000 lbs. A recreational fishing license is not required to harvest any species of smelt in Washington. Recreational fishing is **allowed** from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Friday to Tuesday with dip net gear; open 7 days per week (all hours) for jig gear.

### HABITAT ISSUES:

The intertidal nature of surf smelt spawning habitat in Puget Sound has made the species quite vulnerable to shoreline development activities. Some spawning grounds are currently mere remnants of their original extent. The WAC Hydraulic Codes Rules (WAC 220-110) currently regulate the extent to which bulkhead-fill structure

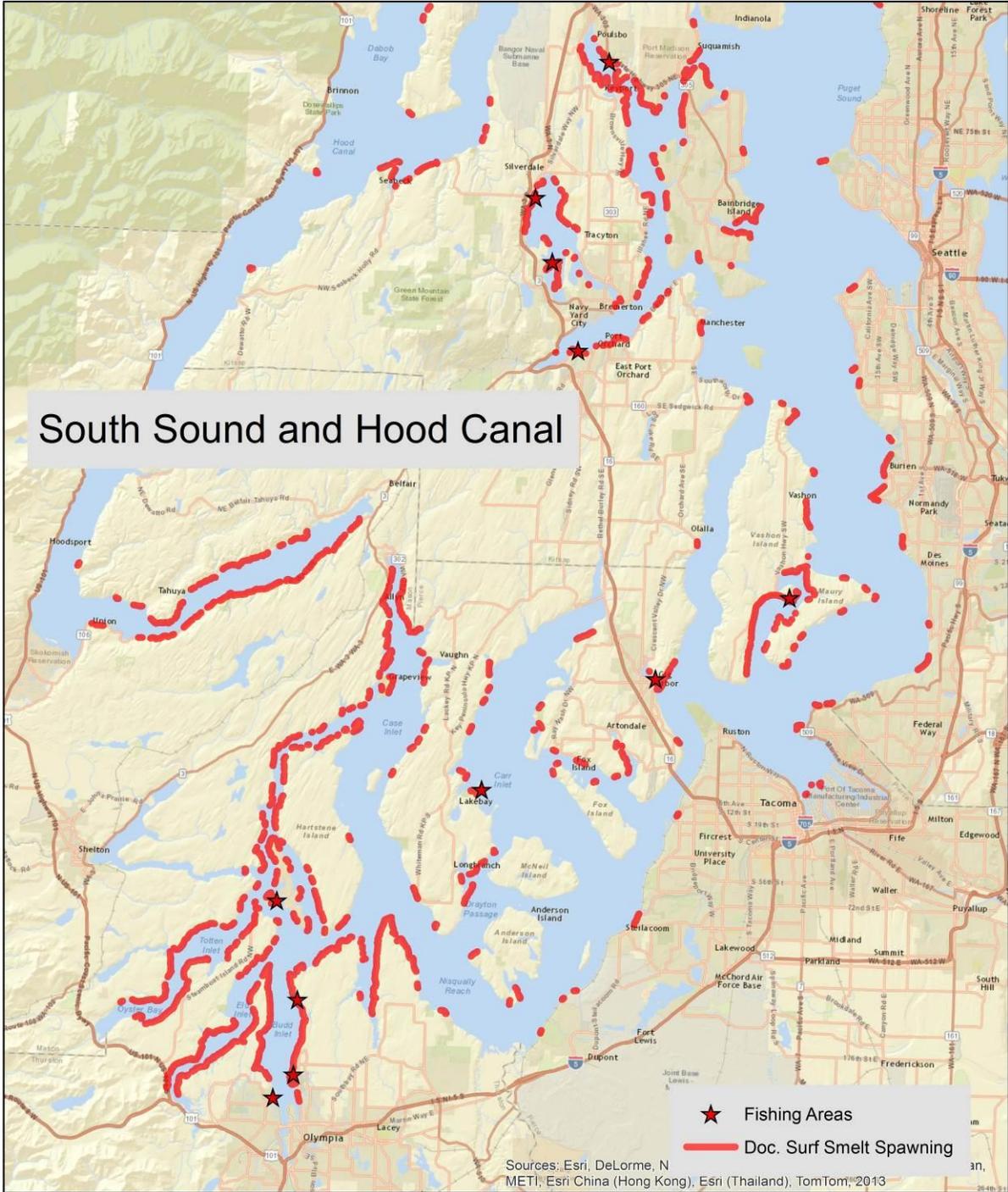
can intrude seaward of the high tide line on known smelt spawning beaches and specific seasons during which admissible work can be undertaken.

QUESTIONS: Contact WDFW Forage Fish Unit, La Conner District Office @ 360-466-4345 x 243.



# Central Sound





	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
Olympic Peninsula/Straits												
Whidbey/Camano Islands												
Birch/Cherry Points												
Fidalgo Bay												
Dungeness Bay												
Liberty Bay/Port Orchard												
Sinclair/Dyes Inlet												
Quartermaster Harbor												
South Hood Canal												
South Puget Sound												
San Juan Islands												

 = Known spawning period

## SURF SMELT SPORT FISHING AREAS

**HAND DIP NET-** Various regional designs for gear. Usually early-morning or late evening high-slack tides are more successful. Occurs from shore as fish move into shallow water to spawn. Most smelt beaches are privately owned -- respect private property.

**JIGGING-** No particular tide more successful, perhaps mornings or evenings are more successful. Herring are usually also available. Usually involves fishing off docks or pier structures on non-spawning aggregations.

### **BELLINGHAM/BLAINE**

Semiahmoo Spit Co. Pk.	July-Jan	Beaches around and south of the headquarters buildings at the base of the spit on the west (outer) shore. May be a year-round spawning stock
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### **FIDALGO ISLAND**

Fidalgo Bay – March Pt.	May-Sept	Dip netting around perimeter of Fidalgo Bay and at March Pt.
Tommy Thompson Trail	May-Sept	Dip netting along trail, north of Fidalgo Bay Resort/RV park.

### **LACONNER WATERFRONT**

Oct. – March	Jigging off float. Best jigging in the northern boat basin. Annual Smelt Derby in February.
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### **SAN JUAN ISLANDS**

Hunter Bay Co. Pk. Lopez Is.	Year-round	Dip netting on the DNR public beach immediately east of the County Park boat launch.
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### **WHIDBEY ISLAND**

Coupeville Waterfront	June – Oct	Dip netting. Coupeville waterfront and areas to the east, mostly boat access.
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Deception Pass State Park	Year round	Jigging off floats just west of Cornet Bay boat ramp. Lots of parking and bathroom facilities.
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Oak Harbor Marina	Year-round	Jigging from F-dock.
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### **CAMANO ISLAND**

Maple Grove County Park Utsalady County Park	June – Oct	Dip netting. Access at Utsalady and Maple Grove boat ramps.
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Cavelero Beach County Park	June – Oct	Dip netting.
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### **LIBERTY BAY**

Poulsbo	Oct – Feb	Dip netting. Small spots at the southern edge of town. Contact the North Kitsap Marine Environmental Center. Mostly private, poor parking.
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### **DYES INLET**

Elwood Point Rec. Area Silverdale City Park	Oct – Jan	Dip netting. Relatively unknown accesses.
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### **SINCLAIR INLET**

Ross Point	Oct – Feb	Dip netting. WDFW purchased public smelt beach. One mile west of the town of Port Orchard. Limited parking and no facilities. Some smelt spawning occurs year round at this site.
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### **QUARTERMASTER HARBOR**

Burton Acres Co. Pk.	Oct – Feb	Dip netting. North side of the point to the launch ramp.
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### **GIG HARBOR**

Oct – March	Possible dip netting on the beach fronting the launch ramp at Randell Dr NW.
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**SOUTH SOUND**

Percival Landing, Olympia	Winter	Occasional concentrations of smelt and herring taken while jigging <del>and dip netting</del> .
Priest Point Park, Olympia Burfoot Co. Pk. Budd Inlet	Sept – Feb	Dip netting. Probably other little known spots among the many miles of spawning beach in Henderson, Budd, Eld and Totten Inlets.
Penrose Pt. St Pk, Carr Inlet	Oct – March	Possible Dip netting on the pea-gravel beach around the day-use picnic area. Potential jig fisheries off the docks inside the harbor.

**HOOD CANAL**

**All waters south of the Hood Canal Bridge are closed year-round to all smelt harvest.**

**SEQUIM BAY**

John Wayne Marina	Winter	Jigging. Reported dense concentrations of surf smelt.
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**DUNGENESS BAY**

Cline Spit	Oct – Jan	Dip netting. Beaches around the launch ramps and on the south shore of the spit.
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**PORT ANGELES**

P.A. Boat Haven	Winter	Jigging. Occasional concentrations of smelt in the boat basin.
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**CLALLAM BAY**

Deep Creek Twin Rivers	May – Sept	Dip netting. East of the mouth of Deep Creek, at the East and West Twin Rivers and at Clallam Bay. Largely private.
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**OCEAN COAST**

Rialto Beach (N. Lapush) Ruby Beach Accesses #4 & #6 (N. Kalaloch)	May – Sept	Dipping in high surf. The area north of Kalaloch is the most popular.
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**Surf smelt spawn has been found at the Washington State beach parks and public access beaches listed below, with presently unknown sport fishery potential:**

San Juan Islands

DNR Beach 260 (Shaw Island)  
Cattle Pt. DNR Beach (San Juan Island)  
English Camp Nat'l Hist. Pk. (San Juan Island)  
E. Mudd Bay St. Pk. Tidelands (Lopez Island)

Canadian Boarder to Everett

Lighthouse Co. Pk. (Anacortes)  
Kayak Pt. Co. Pk.

Camano Island

Camano Island St. Pk.  
Hope Island St. Pk. (N. Skagit Bay)

Kitsap Peninsula

Suquamish Public ramp  
S. Illahee St. Pk.  
Randall Street launch ramp (Gig Harbor)

Outer Coast

North Jetty Access (Ocean Shores)  
Westport Lighthouse St. Pk.

Strait of Juan de Fuca

Old Fort Port Townsend St. Pk.

Fidalgo and Whidbey Island

South Harbor Pk. (Anacortes)  
E. Hoypus Pt. (Deception Pass St. Pk.)  
DNR Beach 144 (N. Whidbey Island)  
Freeland Co. Pk. (Holmes Harbor)

Everett to Tacoma

Brackett Landing Pk. (Edmonds)  
Richmond Beach Co. Pk.  
Alki Beach Pk. (West Seattle)  
Lincoln Park (West Seattle)  
Seahurst Park (Des Moines)  
Brown's Point Park (Tacoma)

South Sound

Penrose Pt. St. Pk.  
Jarrell's Cove St. Pk.  
Stretch Island St. Pk.  
Allyn Public ramp

## Personal Use Smelt Regulations

### WAC 220-56-240 - Daily limits forage fish and other food fish not otherwise provided for

It is unlawful for any person to retain more than the following quantities and sizes of food fish taken for personal use. Unless otherwise provided, other food fish fishing is open the entire year:

(1) Forage fish (including surf smelt, herring, anchovy, sand lance, and sardine): 10 pounds in the aggregate. The possession limit is two daily limits in fresh form. Additional forage fish may be possessed in frozen or processed form. No harvest of Columbia River smelt (eulachon) allowed.

### WAC 220-56-265 Forage fish - Lawful gear

(1) It shall be unlawful to take, fish for and possess herring, candlefish, pilchards, anchovies and smelt taken for personal use except with hand dip net gear not exceeding 36 inches across the bag frame having a maximum mesh size of five-eighths inch stretched mesh size, and forage fish jigger gear having not more than three treble or nine single hooks.

(2) It is unlawful to use a dip bag net to take forage fish unless the operator of the net holds the handle at all times the netting is in the water.

(3) It is unlawful to operate a dip bag net to harvest forage fish from a vessel under power, or to use more than one forage fish dip net at a time.

(4) Only persons with a reduced fee license or a designated harvest card may use a hand-operated gate on a dip net while fishing for forage fish.

(5) Forage fish jigger gear hooks may not have a gap between the shank and the point exceeding 3/8 inch.

(6) Use of gear in violation of this section is an infraction, punishable under RCW [77.15.160](#).

(7) It is unlawful to possess forage fish taken with gear in violation of the provisions of this section. Possession of forage fish while using gear in violation of the provisions of this section is a rebuttable presumption that the forage fish were taken with such gear. Violation of this subsection is punishable under RCW [77.15.380](#) Unlawful recreational fishing in the second degree -- Penalty, unless the forage fish are taken in the amounts or manner to constitute a violation of RCW [77.15.370](#) Unlawful recreational fishing in the first degree -- Penalty.

### WAC 220-56-107 - Fishing hours.

(2) It is unlawful to fish for the following species during the following times and within the following areas:  
(d) **It is unlawful to fish for smelt in Puget Sound from 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. unless the person fishes for smelt using forage fish jig gear.**

### WAC 220-56-270 Smelt - Areas and seasons

(1) Unlawful to fish for or possess Columbia River smelt or eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*).

(2) Fishing for smelt other than Columbia River smelt or eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) is permitted the entire year on Pacific Ocean beaches and in all rivers concurrent with a salmon or gamefish opening, except closed in the Columbia River and tributaries.

(3) Fishing for smelt other than Columbia River smelt or eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) is open in Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca year-round except:

(a) **Closed weekly from 10:00 p.m. Tuesday to 6:00 a.m. Friday for all gear types except forage fish jig gear;** and

(b) Closed year-round in Catch Record Card Area 12 for all gear types.

(c) Violation of this subsection is an infraction, punishable under RCW 77.15.160.

(4) It is unlawful to possess smelt taken with gear in violation of the provisions of this section. Possession of smelt while using gear in violation of the provisions of this section is a rebuttable presumption that the smelt were taken with such gear. Possession of such smelt is punishable under RCW [77.15.380](#)

Unlawful recreational fishing in the second degree -- Penalty, unless the smelt are taken in the amounts or manner to constitute a violation of RCW [77.15.370](#) Unlawful recreational fishing in the first degree -- Penalty.

**WAC 220-56-275 Smelt — Unlawful acts**

It shall be unlawful for any person taking smelt for personal use to fail to retain all smelt caught up to the daily limit.

**WAC 220-56-115 Angling gear — Lawful and unlawful acts**

(1) It is unlawful for any person to use more than one line while angling for personal use except:

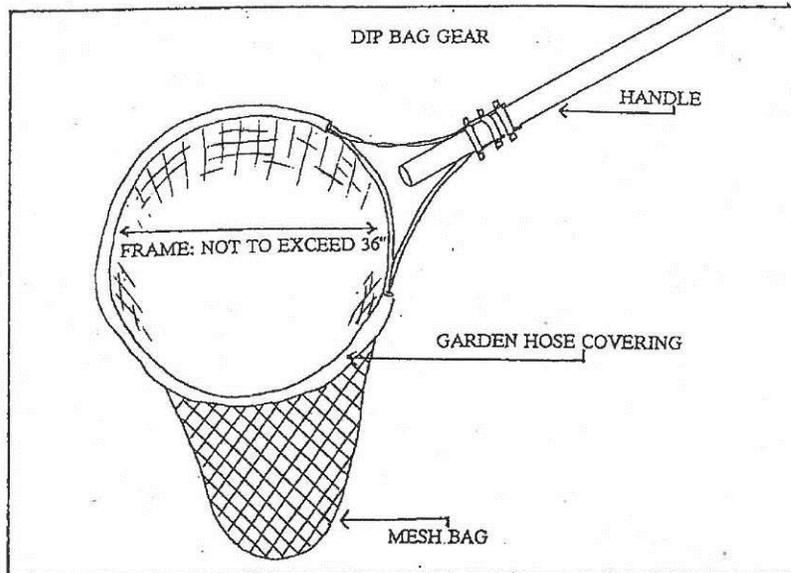
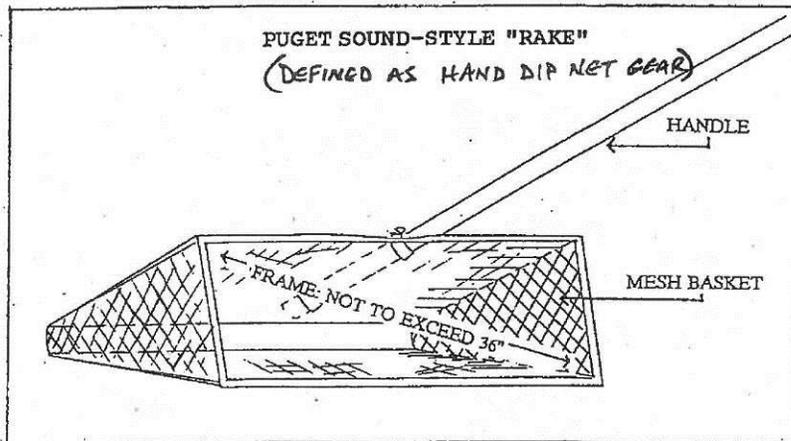
A second line using forage fish jigger gear is lawful while fishing in Catch Record Card Areas 5, 6, 7, 8-1, 8-2, 9, 10, 11, and 13. A violation of this subsection is an infraction, punishable under RCW [77.15.160](#).

**WAC 220-56-150 Unlawful to take another's limit**

It is unlawful for any person to catch, dig or possess fish or shellfish for another person except designated harvesters as provided in WAC [220-55-065](#).

**WAC 220-56-110 Possession of personal-use food fish and shellfish**

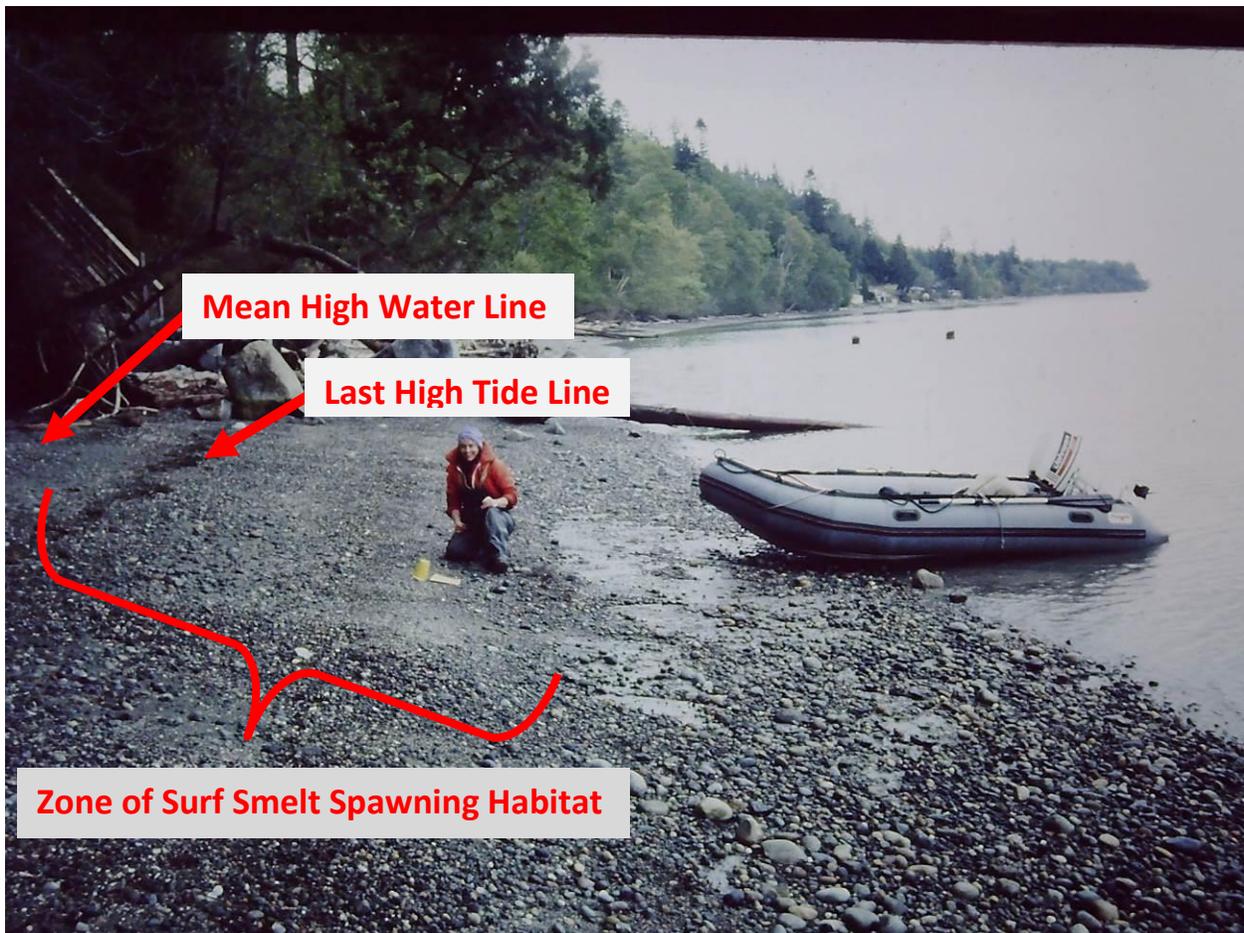
(5) It shall be unlawful for any person taking food fish or shellfish for personal use to intermingle his catch or part of his catch with that of any duly licensed person taking food fish or shellfish for commercial purposes except for commercially caught fish retained for personal use as provided for in WAC [220-20-016](#) and [220-20-021](#).



Two of the most commonly used recreational surf smelt dip bag nets.



Surf smelt, *Hypomesus pretiosus*



Typical Surf Smelt Spawning Beach, Semiahmoo Bay, WA (Photo By: Dan Penttila - WDFW, 1992)