

OREGON AND WASHINGTON DEPARTMENTS OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
JOINT STAFF REPORT - WINTER FACT SHEET NO. 8
Columbia River Compact/Joint State Hearing
March 28, 2019

Fisheries Under Consideration:

- 2019 Select Area winter-summer commercial fisheries (sturgeon retention)
- 2019 Estuary recreational white sturgeon fisheries

Detailed information on stock status and management guidelines for Columbia River fisheries are presented in Joint Staff Reports, which are produced annually and available on-line. The most recent reports are the 2019 Sturgeon/Smelt Report (January 18, 2019) and the 2019 spring/summer report for Chinook, sockeye, steelhead and other species (February 8, 2019). Links to the on-line reports are: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/crc/> and <http://www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/OSCRP/CRM/reports.asp>

RIVER CONDITIONS

Columbia River conditions as measured at Bonneville Dam are currently lower and colder than recent 5-year averages for this date. Current outflow is 197.6 kcfs, which is about 75% of the recent 5-year average of 263.4 kcfs. Water temperature currently measures 42° F, which is colder than the average of 45° F. Current snowpack conditions are ranging from 80-90% of average in the upper Columbia Basin and approximately 120% of average in the Snake River Basin.

STOCK STATUS

White Sturgeon

- Abundance estimates for white sturgeon in the lower Columbia River (LCR) are derived from annual mark/recapture studies. Recent abundance estimates for legal-size fish (38-54 inches fork length (FL)) declined to a low of 72,700 fish in 2012 but increased steadily through 2016, reaching a peak of 224,000 fish. Since 2016, the legal-sized abundance estimate has declined to 162,200 in 2018. The 2019 projected abundance is 164,100. Modeling of future recruitment to legal size results in slight net growth in legal abundance by 2020 under a no-harvest scenario and a moderate decrease under various harvest scenarios.
- Abundance metrics for other size groups of white sturgeon in the LCR remain mixed. The abundance of adult-sized fish (≥ 167 cm FL) in 2019 is 6,100 fish, with the 2016-18 average abundance (7,493) now between the conservation status threshold (3-year average of 3,900 adults) and the desired status level (3-year average of 9,250 adults) identified in the Oregon White Sturgeon Conservation Plan (WSCP). Sub-yearling production in the LCR during 2018 indicates a reduction compared to 2017; however, sub-yearling catch rates in the lower Willamette River were the highest ever measured. The proportion of the population comprised of juvenile and sub-legal fish (63% in 2018) remains near the conservation status threshold (60% juveniles) indicating population productivity and recruitment issues.

MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES

White Sturgeon

- For years when white sturgeon retention is allowed downstream of Bonneville Dam, current Commission guidance on white sturgeon management assumes:
 - Assign 80% of the white sturgeon available for harvest to recreational fisheries and 20% to commercial fisheries.
 - Oregon Commission guidance requires that a 10% conservation buffer be applied if the maximum harvest rate (16%) identified in WSCP is utilized.

2019 RECREATIONAL FISHERIES

White Sturgeon

- Due to the decline of legal-size fish and other indicators during 2008-2012, retention fisheries downstream of Bonneville Dam were closed during 2014-2016; however, based on the increasing trend for legal-size white sturgeon in the LCR during that timeframe, both Commissions approved limited retention fisheries in 2017 and 2018. Sturgeon anglers made a total of 31,900 trips in the LCR in 2018. Anglers in the estuary retention fishery made 18,300 trips and harvested 2,412 fish during an 11-day retention season in May and June. Anglers above Wauna made 11,000 trips during a two-day retention season in September and harvested 1,049 white sturgeon. An additional 2,600 sturgeon angler trips were made for catch and release fishing. No retention fishery occurred in the lower Willamette River due to the limited harvest guideline. The combined harvest on the lower Columbia was 3,461 white sturgeon, or 83% of the 4,190 fish guideline for mainstem fisheries. Additionally, anglers reportedly released 12,131 sublegal, 1,496 legal, and 6,476 over-legal white sturgeon and 39 green sturgeon.
- Earlier this year, staff provided updates on the LCR white sturgeon status to both Commissions and also to the Columbia River Advisor groups. Both Commissions supported implementing sturgeon retention fisheries in 2019 similar to what occurred in 2018. Input from the Advisor groups generally supported implementing 2019 fisheries in a similar fashion to what occurred in 2018. For the area upstream of Wauna powerlines, there was some support for delaying the fishery until late-September or early-October.
- Staff have evaluated options for 2019 retention fisheries, with an initial focus on Estuary recreational and Select Area commercial opportunity.
- To maintain a cautious approach, staff assumed the following when modeling 2019 LCR sturgeon fisheries:
 - Continued use of the standardized legal slot of 44-50 inches FL for all LCR fisheries to facilitate management and provide escapement of larger-size white sturgeon by excluding them from harvest.
 - Modeled a conservative 3.9% harvest rate on 44-50 inch fish (equivalent impact to broodstock escapement of a 4.6% harvest rate on the traditional 38-54 inch size slot).

- Used the previous harvest allocation distribution for recreational fisheries of 48% Estuary, 20% Above Wauna, and 12% in the lower Willamette River.
- Based on the harvest-adjusted 2019 abundance forecast of 160,250 fish (44-50 inch FL), a total of 6,160 white sturgeon would be available for harvest downstream of Bonneville Dam.

Estimated Legal Abundance	160,250
Annual Harvest Guideline	6,160
Commercial (20%)	1,230
Recreational (80%)	4,930
Estuary	2,960
Above Wauna	1,230
Lower Willamette River	740

Recreational White Sturgeon Fisheries

Below Wauna Powerlines (Estuary)

- Given the limited harvest guideline, desire for a somewhat protracted fishery, and expected high effort (based on 2017 and 2018 observations), staff modeling assumptions for the 2019 Estuary fishery included:
 - A mid-May start when catch rates are lower to provide for a longer retention season.
 - Continued use of the days-per-week approach and 2 PM closure to aide in increasing the length of the season and provide staff the opportunity to review fishery performance on a weekly basis.
 - Daily effort in mid-May is expected to be moderate and increase steadily into June, where catch rates are modeled at rates similar to recent years.
- Results of the 2017 and 2018 Estuary retention fisheries provided informative data for designing the 2019 fishery but modeling this fishery continues to remain challenging due to uncertainty in predicting effort. However, staff believes the following fishery proposal represents a reasonable approach for 2019.

Recommendation - 2019 Sturgeon Recreational Fishery for Below Wauna

Season:	Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays May 13 through June 5	11 days
Area:	Mainstem Columbia River from the Wauna powerlines downstream to the mouth at Buoy 10, including Youngs Bay, and all adjacent Washington tributaries	
Allowable Catch:	Up to 2,960 white sturgeon	
	Legal size: 44-inch minimum and 50-inch maximum fork length (Fork length is measured in a straight line from the tip of the nose to the fork in the caudal fin (tail) with the fish laying on its side on a flat surface, with the tape measure/ruler positioned flat <u>under</u> the fish)	
	Daily bag limit: One fish Annual bag limit: Two fish Retention of green sturgeon is prohibited	
Additional Regulations:	On days open to white sturgeon retention, angling for sturgeon is prohibited after 2 PM, including catch and release.	

- The proposed fishery is based on several modeling assumptions. The duration of the retention season will likely need to be adjusted if catch rates and effort are much different than projected.
- The last day of the proposed season coincides with initial arrival of the Rose Festival fleet (June 5-6) which County and State enforcement identified as an issue in 2017.
- To avoid issues related to validation of kept fish, the proposed fishing dates were selected to primarily avoid free fishing weekends scheduled for June 1-2 in Oregon and June 8-9 in Washington. The exception is Saturday June 1; staff considered alternative options to avoid the free fishing date. However, the alternative options either did not match the current effort flight schedule (Wednesday and Saturday) which would compromise the ability to generate catch estimates in June, increased season complexity, or eliminated weekend opportunity in June.
- The expected kept catch for the 11-day season is 2,745 fish (93% of the guideline).
- Per permanent regulations, catch and release fishing is allowed all year (except as noted in Additional Regulations).

Above Wauna Powerlines

- Staff is not prepared to recommend a season structure for the area upstream of the Wauna Powerlines at this time.
- Generally, catch rates in this river section are better during the spring and late fall months. The 3-day 2017 fishery occurred in late October, experiencing poor weather and limited catch. The 2018 season occurred in September (15th and 22nd) during which high catch rates limited the number of fishing days. In general, public feedback on the 2018 fishery was positive but staff may consider a slightly later opener for fall 2019.

- Per permanent regulations, catch and release fishing is allowed year round, except angling for sturgeon is prohibited May 1 through August 31 from Bonneville Dam downstream to a line crossing the Columbia River at Navigation Marker 82 on the Oregon shore westerly to a boundary marker on the Washington shore upstream of Fir Point.

Lower Willamette River

- Similar to the Above Wauna fishery, Oregon staff is not prepared to recommend a sturgeon retention season for the lower Willamette River.
- Given the reduced quota available for this fishery, it has been challenging to design a reasonable fishery.
- Per permanent regulations, catch and release fishing is allowed all year, except angling for sturgeon is prohibited May 1 through August 31 from the Lake Oswego-Oak Grove Railroad Bridge upstream to Willamette Falls.

2019 COMMERCIAL FISHERIES

Select Area Commercial White Sturgeon Fisheries

- The 2019 commercial white sturgeon allocation is 1,230 fish (same as 2018).
- In 2018, commercial sturgeon landings totaled 826 fish, or 67% of the 1,230 fish guideline. Landings were the same (413 fish or 50% each) in mainstem fall fisheries (August) and Select Area fisheries.
- Staff recommends allowing sturgeon retention in Select Area fisheries with a limited weekly landing limit, and discussing fishery-specific allocations at a later date.

<i>Recommendation - 2019 Select Area Commercial White Sturgeon Retention</i>
Effective April 1, 2019, a maximum of four white sturgeon with a fork length of 44-50 inches may be possessed or sold by each participating vessel during each calendar week (Sunday through Saturday). The four white sturgeon possession and sales limit includes all Select Area fisheries.

FUTURE MEETINGS

- No additional Compact or Joint State hearings are scheduled at this time. The Joint Staff will monitor fisheries and recommend additional hearings as needed.