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Chinook season to open for 12 days

Officials agree to allow lower Columbia recreation anglers to fish

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Anglers on the lower Columbia River from Astoria to St. Helens will get 12 days to fish for spring chinook salmon this year.

Oregon and Washington officials agreed Friday to keep a recreational salmon season open from March 24 through April 4 from Buoy 10 to the Hayden Island power lines west tower.

The daily limit in Oregon will be two salmon, only one of which may be a chinook; in Washington it will be one salmon and two steelhead.

Spring chinook angling will be open March 16 through April 30 from Portland upstream to Bonneville Dam with six Tuesday closures to allow for gillnet fishing.

This year, a large run of 269,300 upriver spring chinook is forecast for the Columbia River, but a weak run of just 34,000 chinook is projected to return to the Willamette River.

To protect the weak run of Willamette spring chinook, the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission voted earlier this month to keep all spring chinook sport fishing seasons on the Columbia River above the mouth of the Willamette. Anglers on the lower Columbia worried they would have to move upstream to the Portland area to catch any of the plentiful upriver chinook run.

But the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission decided to keep a fishery for the lower Columbia River. At a joint compact hearing Friday, the two states agreed to allow 450 Willamette chinook to be caught in the lower Columbia, which could pave the way to a spring chinook sport season of about 2,500 fish below the Interstate 5 bridge.

The sport season above the I-5 bridge to Bonneville Dam is expected to produce a catch of 15,800 spring chinook.

"I was happy Washington overrode Oregon's decision," said fishing guide Billy Davis, of Warrenton's Gale Force Guides. "It's better than nothing. I was happy to see a one-fish limit too. That might make it

last a little longer. It's definitely better than what we thought they were going to do."

Gillnet seasons will be open on the Columbia River mainstem on Tuesdays from March 25 through April 29 upstream of the Willamette River to Beacon Rock. The sport season will be closed while gillnets are on the river to avoid conflicts between the two contentious groups.

The commercial fishery will be managed up to 76 percent of its allocation of impacts on wild spring chinook up to May 1. According to Jim Wells, president of the gillnetting group Salmon for All, the commercial fleet lost about 4 percent of its allocation, which determines how long the fleet can fish for hatchery stocks.

"We lost probably 600 fish when those four points of impacts were shifted to the sport side," he said.

After a contentious battle before both Oregon and Washington fish and wildlife commissions, the two states reconciled their decisions on splitting the wild spring chinook allocation between sport and commercial fishers Friday.

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission voted to change the split of impacts from 57 percent sport and 43 percent commercial to 65 percent sport and 35 percent commercial, and the Oregon Fish and Wildlife decided not to change the allocation split but to use a 10 percent buffer to keep the sport season open through April 30 above the mouth of the Willamette River.

Wells said Friday's meeting left sport fishers with 61 percent of the wild spring chinook impacts and the commercial fleet with 39 percent.