



Sport salmon industry gets boost

By Evan Caldwell
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ILWACO --- From across the boat, Milt Gudgell saw a fishing pole twitch. It was enough to make him jump into action.

"You got a fish on," the charter skipper screamed. "Get it. Get that tip up. You got it. Come on now."

Soon, Justin Presler, 24, of Spokane Valley had caught his first salmon and was high-fiving Gudgell.

"I didn't exactly know what to do, people were yelling at me, my pole was all over the place --- but it was awesome," Presler said Saturday.

Presler was one of eight people who booked an excursion with Gudgell aboard the Sarah Kay, and Gudgell and other coastal business owners expected to see more visitors like him this summer.

To be sure, the first seven-day-a-week ocean sport fishery for chinook and coho in 22 year off the mouth of the Columbia River is giving a small boost to economies in Ilwaco and other Pacific County communities. But hoteliers, restaurateurs and salmon charter operators say tourist action should be hotter.

Still, every bit helps, Gudgell notes. "These people paid me, they paid to stay in a hotel, they paid to eat out here, then they paid for fuel, groceries and clothing here," said Gudgell, owner Pacific Salmon Charters at Ilwaco. "Figure that's \$200 a person, at least, and that adds up to a major industry here."

In April, the Pacific Fisheries Management Council announced catch quotas of 117,600 for coho and 16,250 for chinook for recreational salmon fishing from Cape Falcon to Leadbetter Point. In addition, the council allowed fishing on Friday and Saturday in addition to the traditional Sunday-Thursday openers.

So far this season, an estimated 15 percent of the coho catch and 5.4 percent of the chinook quota has been taken.

Darrell Winters, 58, of Harrah, Wash., came for the fishing while his wife, Patty, went shopping in Ilwaco and Long Beach.

"She got seasick last time, so she's exploring the area," Winters said.

Now a month into the salmon season, fishing is "red hot," said Butch Smith, owner of Coho Charters and Motel at the Port of Ilwaco.

"It's old-school fishing; it's as good as it gets," Smith said. "The seven-day-a-week season is starting to bring more people back and introduce more people back into fishing. But still, there is plenty of room at charter offices."

Smith said that recent poor fishing seasons scared away some fishermen and the industry is just now seeing a rebirth. "Our business is up 27 percent from last year and our motel is up 35 percent from last year," he said. "Most local businesses are seeing this growth, too."

Una Boyle, executive director of the Long Beach Peninsula Visitors Bureau, said that while it's tough to judge how this salmon season is affecting the economy, "it does feel like we're busier."

"Certainly when there is salmon fishing, we're busy," she said. "Fishing is a major component of our economic stability. When there is not fishing, the Peninsula's economy suffers."

Ananta Tael, manager of Heidi's Inn in Ilwaco, said the local hotel and motel industry could be better.

"We need more fishermen," Tael said. "In the weekends, we are getting booked up by people headed to Long Beach for festivals. ... When the seven-day-a-week fishing was announced, we were hoping for more fishermen. We'll see how August goes."

Nancy Gorshe, president of the Long Beach Peninsula Visitor's Bureau, has seen steady business at her Seaview restaurant, The Depot.

"We're about the same as last year," Gorshe said about her profit. "I think people are being cautious because gas prices are still up there. But, because of the locals, we're not hurting as much as the hotels."

Gorshe and Gudgell said the local economy and fishery can handle a lot more pressure.

"It's the weekday stuff that's not full. That's still hard to fill," he said. "When Friday and Saturday opened up, people just moved from the weekday to the weekend."

Gudgell and Smith said more advertising and support are needed to attract more fishermen.

"We have not had a strong advocate for fishing in the state for as long as I can remember," Gudgell said.

In the past few years, the number of fishermen has waned but is just starting to rebound this year, said Doug Milward, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife ocean salmon manager.

"I attribute some of that loss just to the cost of travelling; gas prices have really hurt us," Milward said.

In 1990, the local fisheries would have 20,000 anglers in a week in August, he said. In the first three weeks of the season, there have been a total of 5,550 anglers off the mouth of the Columbia.

"The hope was that if we went seven-days-a-week it would keep people coming back," Milward said. "The Friday and Saturday is a big chunk of the weekly total. But, still, most people are learning about it by word of mouth."

Jennie Kendrick, 56, a retired teacher from Las Vegas visiting Ilwaco, watched as fishermen walked off the docks Saturday morning.

"I've gone salmon fishing before in Alaska, but this looks fun. I'm hoping to go salmon fishing here," she said.

Don Shelby, 47, of Spokane was fishing Saturday and has visited Ilwaco each of the past four years as a stress relief from his roofing job.

"This is about catching salmon, catching fish. I don't care what fish it is. It's just a thrill," Shelby said. "A lot of people would rather be riding ATVs or hiking. Not me. This is great; this is it."