



Current Reflections

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Needed: an honest debate on the Columbia River salmon harvest

This week marks the opening of the fishing season on the Columbia River, ironically moving forward against the backdrop of federal regulators likely closing ocean fishing from Oregon's north coast to the Mexico border.

While a good run of Chinook salmon is expected in the Columbia River this year, the sudden collapse of west coast Chinook salmon underscores the tenuous nature of fish runs.

This also raises the question of why the debate on salmon harvest in the Columbia is always about who gets how much, rather than should there be a harvest at all.

There are 13 runs of salmon protected under the Endangered Species Act moving upstream in the Columbia, but fish conservation doesn't seem to enter the harvest debate. Yet, these adult fish represent the future of salmon in the Northwest.

Harvest targets runs of hatchery fish. Hatcheries, first built in the late 19th century, were intended to provide fish for harvest to mitigate human-caused losses of wild fish.

However, today one of the concerns about harvest is that gill netting is indiscriminate, capturing and killing all the salmon caught in the net – whether hatchery or wild salmon. With sports fishing, protected salmon can be identified and must be returned to the river.

So-called incidental catches of protected wild salmon are authorized by NOAA Fisheries, which allows commercial fishers to take more than 50 percent of some of the returning salmon runs. Wild salmon are few in numbers and simply cannot endure such high rates of harvest.

Families and business in the region already have invested \$8 billion through their electricity bills in two key pieces of a comprehensive approach to salmon recovery: hydrosystem operations and habitat improvements.



In 2007 alone, the regional salmon recovery investment was \$861 million. In stark contrast, the lower Columbia commercial harvest is valued at \$4 million annually.

The question that needs to be asked is what benefit do we really get from this massive ongoing investment when we continue to ignore the other two critical pieces – harvest and hatcheries – needed for salmon recovery?

The fact is that we cannot protect the federally listed salmon runs, much less hope to recover them, without meaningful reform of harvest and hatcheries.

We can maintain some level of harvest and protect the multi-billion dollar investment in salmon recovery being made by Northwest families and businesses by:

- Replacing gill netting with more selective methods such as terminal fisheries, tangle nets or fish wheels.
- Marking all hatchery fish so selective harvest methods can be used.
- Improving the quality and reducing the quantity of hatchery fish.
- Reducing or stopping harvest until protected fish are solidly on the path to recovery.
- Having the region's electricity consumers buy out the \$4 million commercial fishing industry.

With the closure of the west coast ocean fishery, it really is time for this region to have an honest debate on Columbia River commercial harvest – before it is too late.

Related Links:

[Coastal Conservation Association Pacific Northwest](#) is a grassroots advocacy group dedicated to the conservation and restoration of coastal marine resources. A regional chapter of a national organization, their mission is to conserve and restore coastal marine resources.

Letters to the Editor – The Oregonian – [Gill Nets Must Go](#):

Northwest RiverPartners is a partnership of farmers, electric utilities and large and small businesses in the Pacific Northwest, joined together to ensure that the Columbia and Snake rivers remain living, working rivers. It was founded on the belief that these rivers are the Northwest's greatest natural resource providing residents with clean, affordable and renewable electricity, flood control, irrigation for our farm lands, healthy fish and wildlife, maritime trade, and a multitude of recreational opportunities. For more information, please visit www.nwriverpartners.org.