

Proposed Fishery Rule Changes:

Puget Sound commercial and
recreational surf smelt fishery



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Presentation Outline



- Background: policy, biology, ecological importance, and fisheries
- Rationale for rule review/change
- Proposed rule-change options
- Public input on options to date
- Next steps

Forage Fish Management Policy C3012



- Maintain healthy forage fish populations
- Consider the role of forage fish in the marine ecosystem and the need to supply sufficient quantities of forage fish for ecosystem needs
- If insufficient information exists or the condition of the resource is poor, a conservative approach to fisheries will be taken
- The achievement of maximum yield shall not be a goal of forage fish management

Surf Smelt Biology

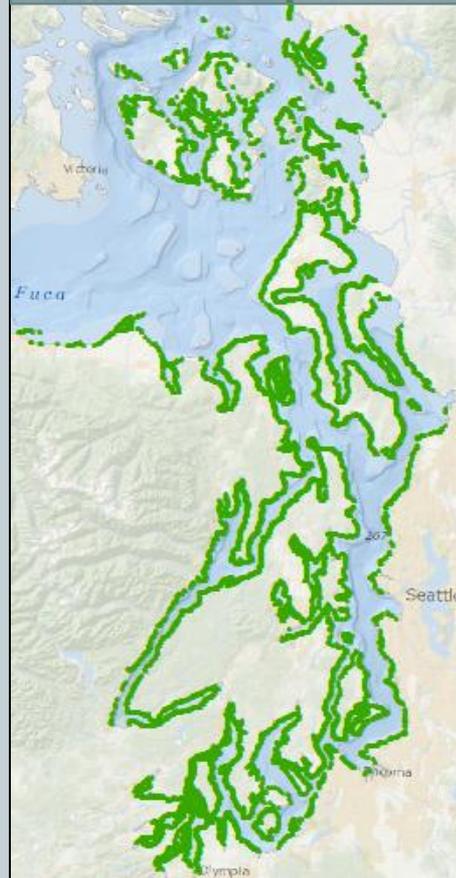


- Short lived. Mature and spawn at age 1-2
- Spawning occurs year-round but varies by area
 - Some areas with only winter or summer spawning
- Spawn only on gravel and sand in intertidal zone
- Unknown if individuals are repeat spawners and whether spawning fidelity exists

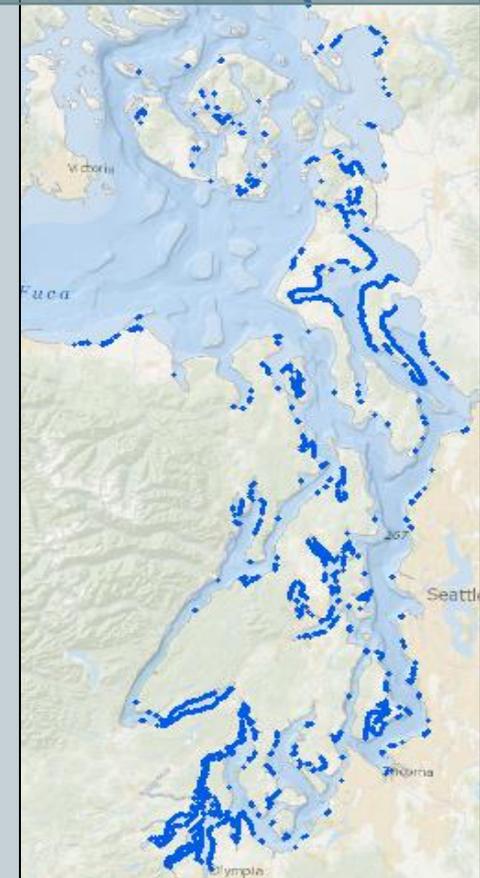
Surf Smelt Biology

- **Stock assessment**
 - Spawn throughout Puget Sound (266 miles documented)
 - Recent genetic research suggests one stock
 - No abundance estimates available
- **Habitat protection**
 - Spawning habitat = no net loss; WAC 220-110.

Spawning Beach Distribution 1977-2013



Surveyed
(1077 miles)



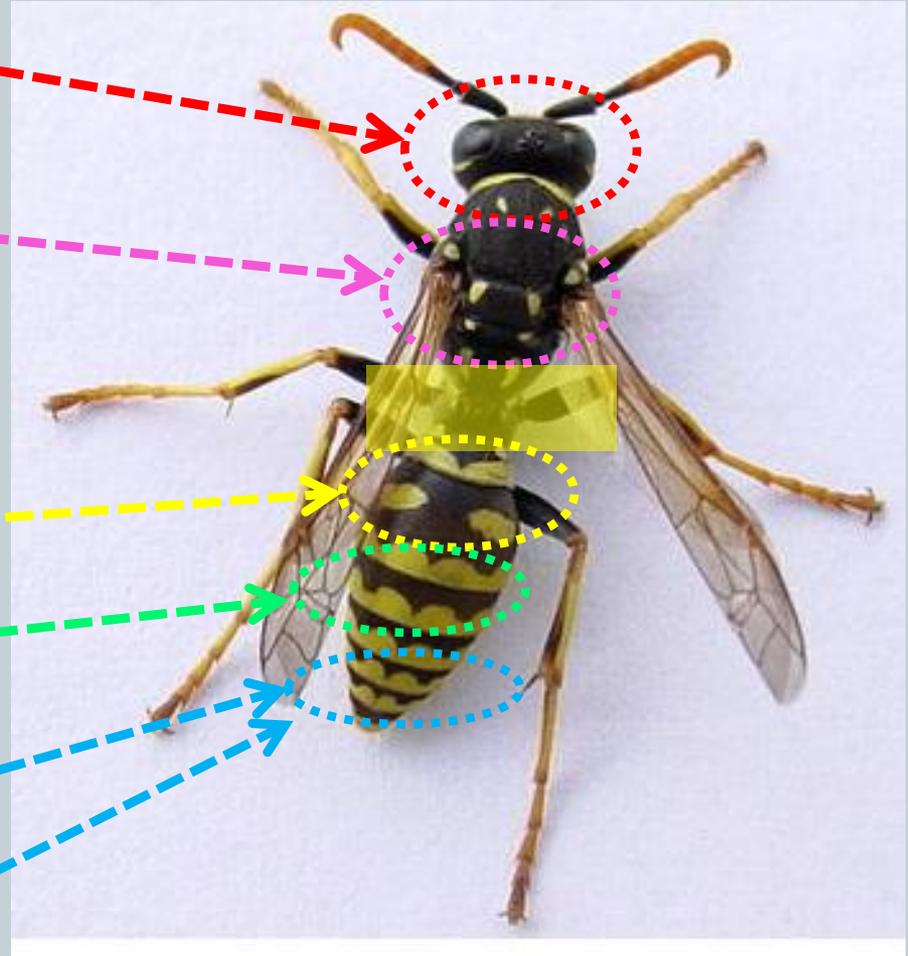
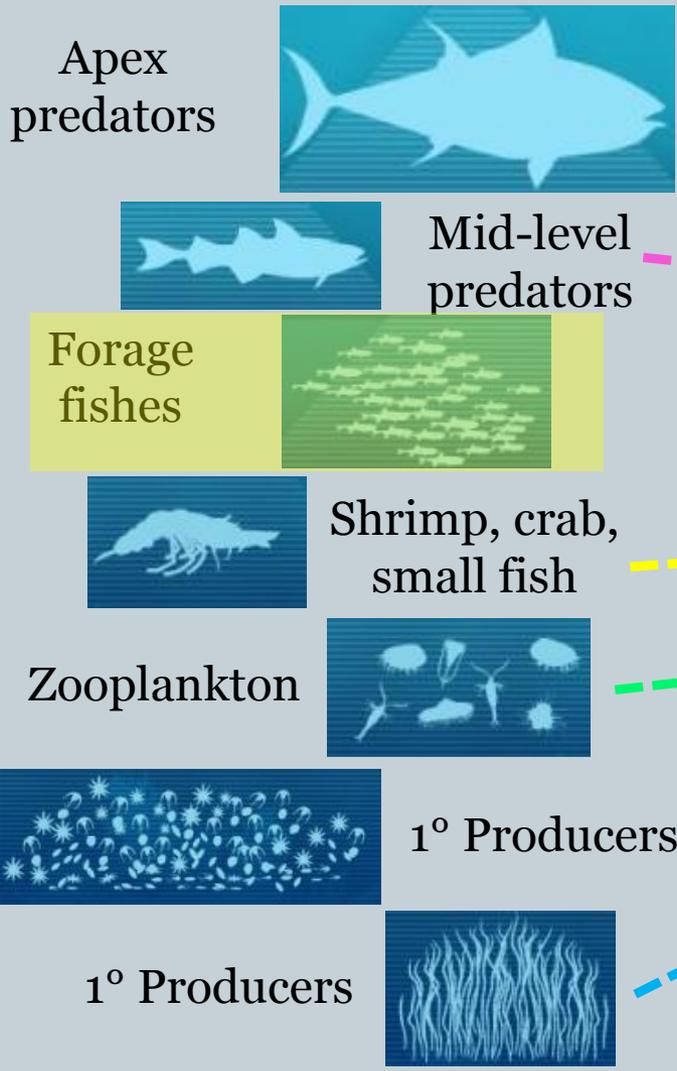
Surf Smelt
(266 miles)

Surf smelt are ecologically important



- Key link in food chain
 - Forage fish recognized by Puget Sound Partnership as an indicator of the overall health of the Sound
- Spawning habitat threatened by shoreline development and sea level rise
 - 6" rise could cause 25% egg loss on average, 70% on some beaches
- Pollution affects reproduction, biomass, but to an unknown degree

The “wasp waist” food web model



Commercial Smelt Fisheries

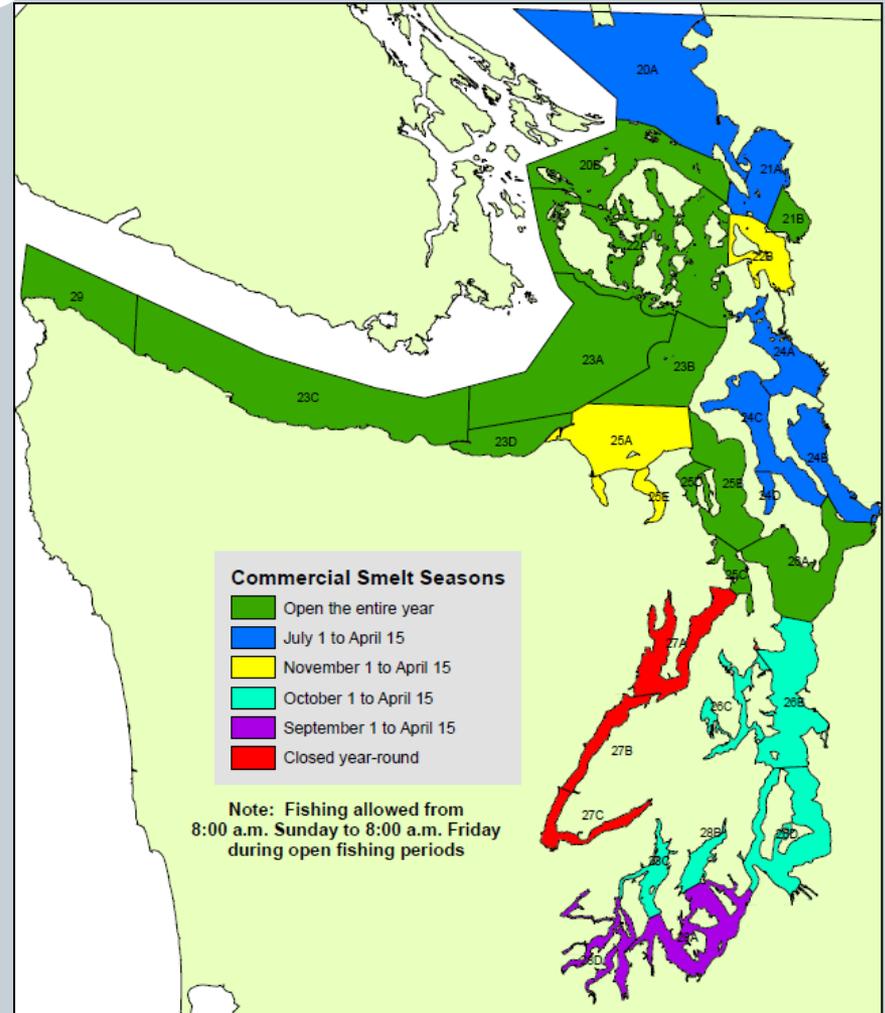


- Drag net (beach seine) currently sole capture method being used
- Purse seine and dip bag net open, but not fished



Commercial Smelt Fisheries

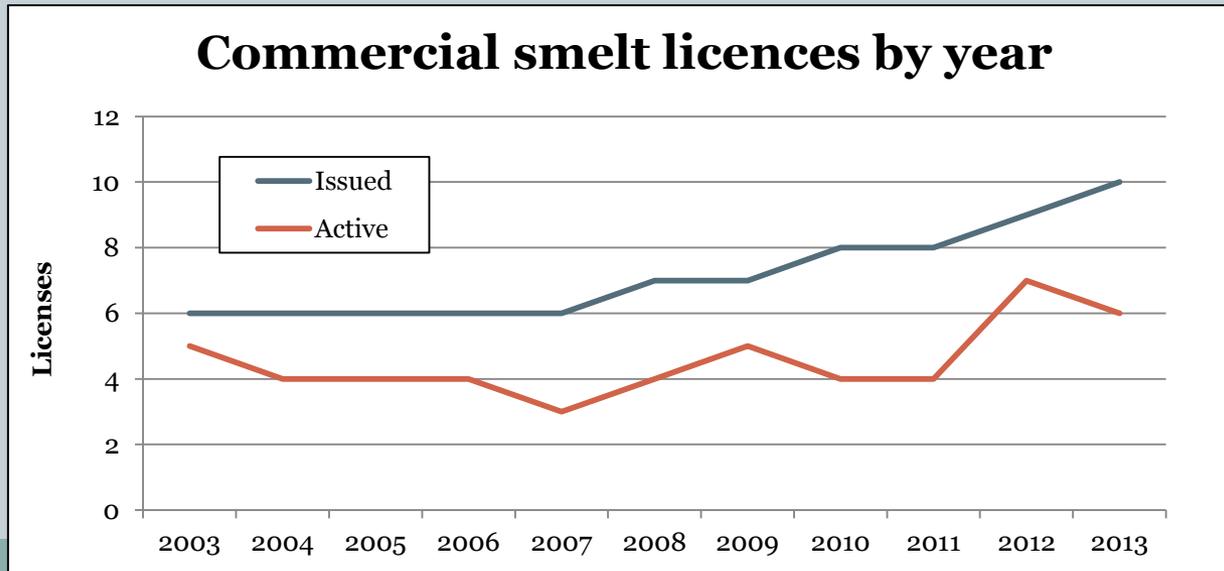
- Commercial seasons vary by region
 - Designed to protect early spawning period
 - Provides exclusively recreational fisheries in summer
- Hood Canal closed year-round
- Closed Fri. and Sat. in all areas



Commercial Smelt Licenses



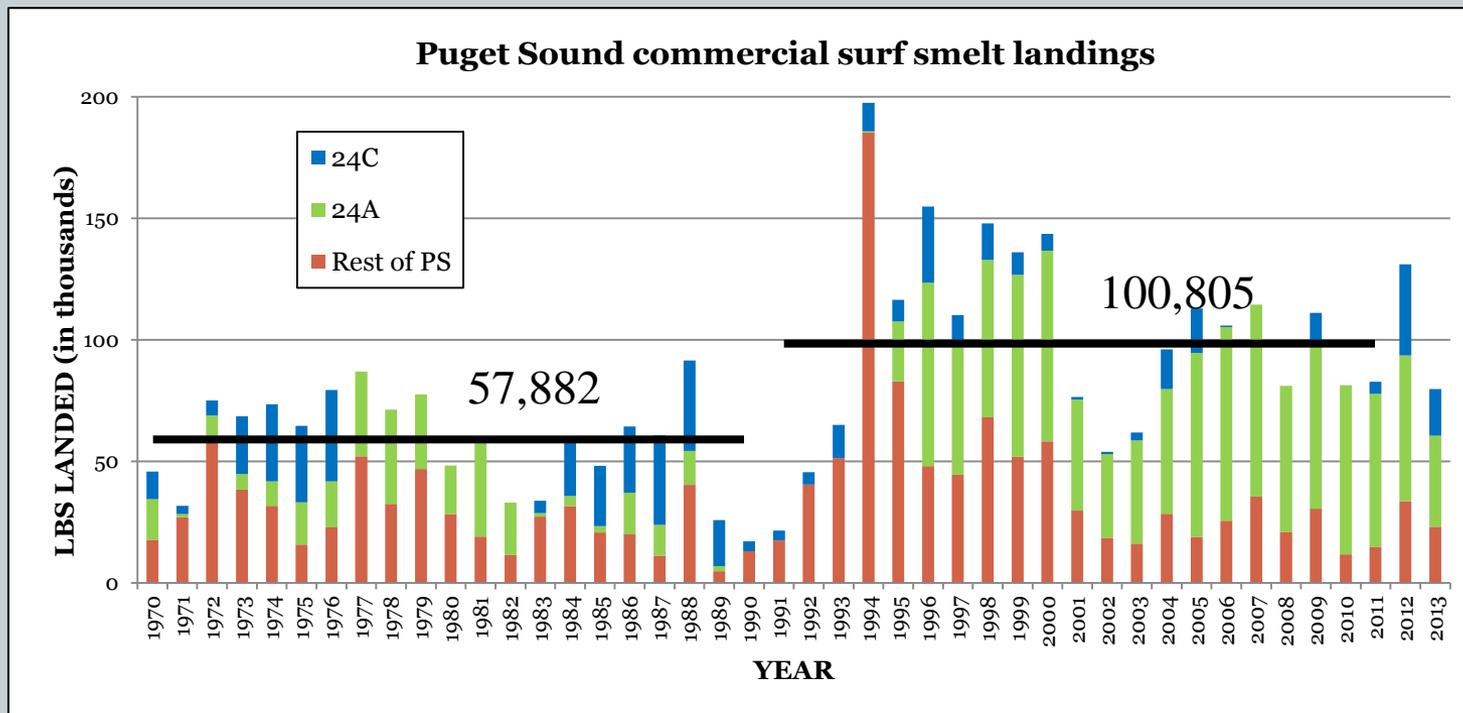
- Since 2003 the number of issued licenses has increased from 6 to 10
- No more than 7 licenses have ever landed smelt during a given year
 - In most seasons 2-3 licenses account for ~90% of catch



Commercial Smelt Fisheries



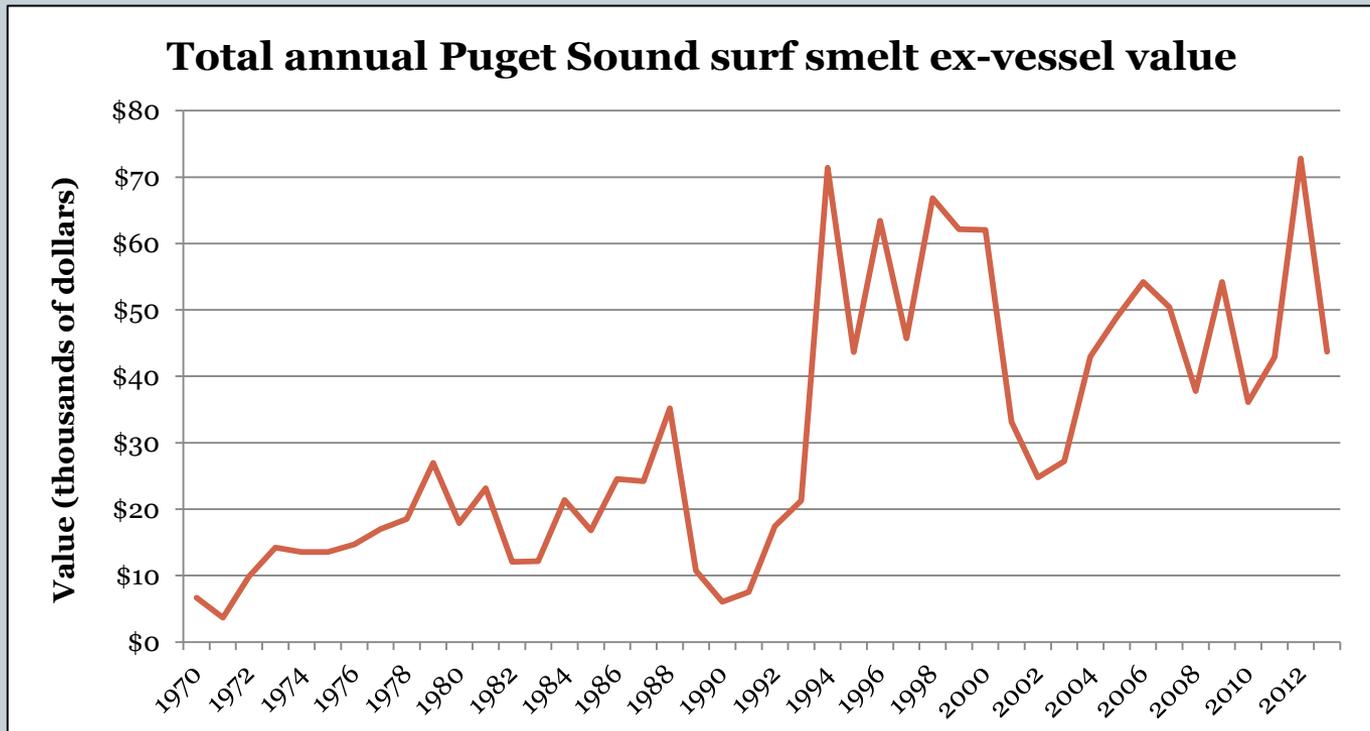
- Average annual harvest in Puget Sound has increased 74%, comparing 1970-80s to 1990-2000s
- Most harvest comes from northern Camano Is.



Commercial Ex-vessel Value



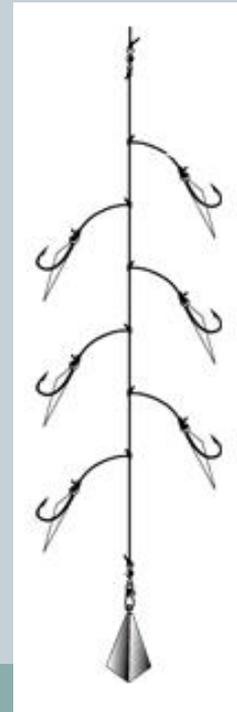
- Value of smelt at initial point of sale (commercial buyer)



Recreational Smelt Fisheries



- Dipnet gear – mostly for human consumption
- Jig gear – for both consumption and salmon bait
- Harvest and effort unknown. License not required



Recreational Smelt Fisheries



- **Season**
 - Open year-round, Sound-wide, except Hood Canal
 - Closed Wed.+Thurs. for dipnetting. Open 7 days/wk for jig
- **Dipnet mesh must be $<5/8$ " to prevent gilling**
- **Daily limit = 10 combined lbs of all forage fish species**
- **All smelt caught must be retained**
 - High mortality due to handling stress
 - Females generally larger than males at a given age

Rationale for Review/Change



- Ensure meeting Commission Policy guidance
- Ecological role of smelt in Puget Sound
 - Forage for ESA-listed species and species of concern
- Increase in commercial harvest since 1970-80s
 - Increase by 74%
- Recreational effort and harvest remain unknown
- Conflicts between fishers and landowners in specific areas

Option 1



- Status quo
- Maintains the current commercial and recreational fishing regulations
 - Commercial beach seining and recreational dip netting allowed 5 days per week; recreational jigging all days
 - Commercial season varies by area; Recreational season open year-round
 - Fishing can occur during any hour on open days
 - Hood Canal remains closed to fishing

Option 2



- Close commercial fishery on Sundays. Implement 10PM-6AM “night closure” on all remaining open days
- Implement “night closure” for recreational fishery on each open day (Fri-Tues)
- Close inactive commercial smelt gear types
 - Purse Seine
 - Dip bag net
- Could reduce harvest by approximately 40%
 - Assumes no change in fishing behavior

Option 3



- Close all commercial smelt fishing in Puget Sound
- Implement “night closure” for recreational fishery on each open day
- Close inactive commercial smelt gear types
 - Purse Seine
 - Dip bag net
- Would result in significant reduction in overall harvest of smelt in Puget Sound

Public Comment



- Meeting with fishing industry Jan. 30th, 2014
- Public Comment period open Feb. 24th – May 30th
- Public meeting Mar. 21st to discuss proposed alternatives
- Public Comments received to date:
 - 24 People signed in at the industry and public meetings
 - 758 comments received through April 7:
 - ✦ Option 1: 25%
 - ✦ Option 2: 3%
 - ✦ Option 3: 70%
 - ✦ Other: 2%

Public Comments: Option 1



- Maintain current fisheries – don't see a problem with the resource
- There is not adequate data to justify a reduction in harvest
- The commercial smelt fishery on Lopez Is. is a community event – don't close this fishery
- If there are problems with homeowners address the problems in those locations

Public Comments: Option 2



- Reduce fishing until a better understanding of the Puget Sound population is known
- Support a more conservative approach to provide smelt as food for other species
- Prefer night fishing, if needed only close N. end Camano Is.

Public Comments: Option 3



- Conserve smelt for other species in the food chain
- Protect smelt to assist with restoration of salmon, steelhead and other species
- Adopt option 3 to prevent overfishing of smelt
- Concern for substantial drop in smelt numbers from historical levels

Public Comments: Other



- Recommend a recreational license for smelt to fund studies
- Limit the number of commercial licenses to stabilize the harvest
- Reopen harvest of smelt in Hood Canal
- Close all commercial and recreational fishing to provide food for other species

Next Steps



- **Fish and Wildlife Commission public hearing Apr. 11-12th in Olympia**
- Fish and Wildlife Commission action at Jun. 13-14th meeting

Questions?

