

Puget Sound Chinook winter minimum size limit reduction fact sheet

Background: The minimum size limit for Chinook retention has varied widely during the history of the Puget Sound sport fishery. It was 12" in the 1930's, no size limit in the 1970's, size limit of 20" in the late 1970's, and has remained 22" (today's limit) since 1983. The current size limit (22") was designed to help achieve 50:50 harvest sharing between state and tribal fisheries. The idea of reducing the size limit has been proposed by anglers for many years with options ranging from year-round size limit reductions to reductions only within winter blackmouth and/or mark-selective fisheries (MSF). The majority of the support is for winter MSF's only.

1) Modeling of the size limit change has been approved

In 2013, the Pacific Fishery Management Council approved the changes necessary to properly model size limit changes in the Fishery Regulation Assessment Model (FRAM).

2) Size limit reductions will have a negligible impact on ESA-listed Chinook

Preliminary modeling indicates that reducing the minimum size limit from 22" to 20" during winter MSFs will not measurably increase ESA impacts, because these are mark-selective, hatchery-directed fisheries.

3) Recreational fisheries will see an increase in the number of allowable encounters

The abundance and size structure of fish present in the Puget Sound in any given year is variable, but on average reducing the size limit to 20" may translate into a ~30% increase in what's considered to be legal to keep during winter MSFs and a ~10% increase during summer fisheries. These estimates are based on test fishery length-frequency data and correspond well with FRAM predictions.

4) Released fish have a very low chance of being caught again

The loss in future access to big Chinook (age 4-5) due to the increased harvest of small blackmouth (mostly age 2) is minimal due to the natural mortality that will occur anyway (e.g., 50% chance of surviving from age 2 to 5 in the absence of fishing and maturation), combined with the relatively small contribution to total fishery-related mortality arising from current fisheries. For these same reasons, it is unlikely that any increase in harvest of 20-22" fish during winter MSFs will cause an evolutionary change (e.g., towards younger maturation) in the targeted hatchery populations.

5) Monitoring fisheries will continue so that changes are well understood

Given that it has been nearly 20 years since the minimum limit was less than 22", it will be necessary to monitor fisheries subject to this potential regulation change at a level that's sufficient to measure changes in total fishing effort, angler behavior (e.g., compliance, voluntary release), catch success, and stock exploitation patterns. The sampling programs already in place for our 'intensively monitored' mark-selective fisheries are sufficiently rigorous to provide this insight, but new approaches may also be considered.

6) Reasoning for reducing the size limit to 20" during winter fisheries

Reducing the minimum size limit to 20" will allow for more successful trips. It will allow anglers to access a greater fraction of the hatchery production that they help to fund through license fees, while simultaneously reducing the number of hatchery strays on spawning grounds. Increased harvest in non-treaty sport fisheries will help restore 50:50 sharing of allowable catch where inequities are perceived.