

**OREGON AND WASHINGTON DEPARTMENTS OF FISH AND WILDLIFE
JOINT STAFF REPORT - WINTER FACT SHEET NO. 3
Columbia River Compact/Joint State Hearing
January 23, 2024**

Fisheries under consideration: Non-treaty mainstem research-level commercial smelt

Detailed information on stock status and management guidelines for Columbia River fisheries are presented in Joint Staff Reports, which are produced annually and available on-line. The most recent report is the 2024 Sturgeon/Smelt Report (January 12, 2024) available at: <https://wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/management/columbia-river/reports> or <https://www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/OSCRP/CRM/jsmreports.asp>

RIVER CONDITIONS

- As of Jan 21, the five-day average outflow at Bonneville Dam is 122 kcfs compared to the five-year average of 160 kcfs. The current five-day average water temperature at Bonneville Dam is 36 °F compared to the five-year average of 40 °F. The five-day average visibility at Bonneville Dam is 7 feet compared to the five-year average of 6.7 feet.

STOCK STATUS

Columbia River Smelt (Eulachon)

- Columbia River smelt (Eulachon) return annually to the Columbia River to spawn in the mainstem and several of its tributaries downstream of Bonneville Dam. The fish typically begin to enter the Columbia River in December and peak tributary abundance is usually in February or March. Columbia River smelt are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).
- Eulachon abundance increased steadily from 2011 to 2014, reaching a peak abundance of 16.6 million pounds in 2014, followed by a decline to 370,000 pounds in 2018. Since 2018, Eulachon abundance has ranged from a low of 370,000 pounds in 2018 to a high of 18,300,000 pounds in 2022. Eulachon abundance in 2023 was 17,000,000 pounds, the second largest run since 2011.

MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES

Columbia River Smelt (Eulachon)

- In September 2023 the states finalized the [2nd edition of the Washington Oregon Eulachon Management Plan](#) (WOEMP) which utilizes three pre-season abundance indicators to inform target harvest rates for commercial and recreational fisheries. The plan also includes in-season triggers that allow managers to alter harvest rates up or down depending on the apparent strength of that year's run.

- The process from the framework of the WOEMP results in a target harvest rate of 2% for 2024 (Table 1).
 - P1: The indicator averages the 2021-2023 run size estimates of 9.0 million, 18.3 million, and 17.0 million pounds, respectively. This gives a P1 value of 14.8 million pounds for 2024, within the range of 6.0-20.5 million pounds of fish.
 - P2: This indicator assesses the trend in run sizes over the previous two years and calculates the difference of the 2022 and 2023 run sizes of 18.3 million and 17.0 million pounds, respectively. The resulting value of -1.3 million indicates a decreasing (or negative) trend in run sizes over the previous two years.
 - P3: The final indicator assesses the forecast for the current run. A neutral forecast requires ODFW and WDFW to take a precautionary approach and assume a negative forecast.

Table 1. Summary of harvest phases. Evaluation of the P1, P2, and P3 pre-season harvest indicators inform the selection of the harvest phase and target harvest rate.

Harvest Phase	Harvest Rate	P1 (in millions)		P2	P3
		min	max		
1	1%	-	1.5	--	--
		1.5	5.9	negative	negative
2	2%	1.5	5.9	positive	negative
		1.5	5.9	negative	positive
		6.0	20.5	negative	negative
3	5%	1.5	5.9	positive	positive
		6.0	20.5	positive	negative
		6.0	20.5	negative	positive
4	10%	6.0	20.5	positive	positive
		20.5	+	--	--

- In-season management triggers based on CPUE data collected in the proposed mainstem commercial fishery may upgrade or downgrade the Harvest Phase.

2024 NON-TREATY FISHERIES

Columbia River Research-Level Commercial Smelt Fisheries

- Recent limited commercial research fisheries occurred primarily in February with a two days per week approach. Due to a decrease in participation and continued need to assess the run, the fishery has expanded to three days per week from late January through mid-March.
- Mainstem Columbia River commercial landings averaged approximately 10,600 pounds (range 110–27,398 pounds) annually during 2014–2018 and 2020–2023 and averaged an estimated annual exploitation rate of 0.12% (range 0.01–0.31%).

- Abundance indicators for the 2024 smelt return suggest a moderate to strong return of the predominant age classes (age-3, age-4, and age-5). The 2024 run is expected to be similar to or slightly lower in magnitude than the 2023 return of 17 million pounds.
- The biological data collected during the commercial fishery allow staff to investigate attributes of the annual Eulachon run into the Columbia River. Landings data from the commercial fishery also help to provide an in-season monitoring tool to inform whether the run can support recreational harvest opportunity. Therefore, due to a history of low exploitation rates and the valuable information collected by this fishery, staff designed the 2024 recommendation using a similar approach to the 2023 commercial fishery.
- Staff reviewed the recommendations with the Columbia River Commercial Advisory Group and heard general support for the season structure set during 2023. Therefore, staff recommend the 2024 schedule include fishing periods on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.

<i>Recommendation: 2024 Mainstem Commercial Smelt Fishery</i>	
Season:	Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays (5 AM to 5 PM) January 24 through March 14. 23 periods
Area:	Zones 1-3
Gear:	Gillnet only. Mesh size may not exceed two inches stretch measure. Nets may not exceed 1,500 feet in length along the cork line.
Allowable Sales:	Smelt
Misc. Regulations:	Multiple net rule in effect. Nets not specifically authorized for use in this fishery may be onboard the vessel if properly stored. A properly stored net is defined as a net on a drum that is fully covered by a tarp (canvas or plastic) and bound with a minimum of ten revolutions of rope with a diameter of 3/8 (0.375) inches or greater. 24-hour quick reporting required for Washington buyers, pursuant to WAC 220-352-315. Oregon buyers are required to electronically submit fish receiving tickets pursuant to OAR 635-006-0210. Electronic fish tickets must be submitted within 24 hours of closure of the fishing period, or within 24 hours of landing for fishing periods lasting more than 24 hours.

- The proposed fishery will continue to maintain the historic index of run strength (pounds/landing) and provide an indication of freshwater abundance to inform tributary recreational fishery management decisions, while providing a small harvest opportunity.
- The proposed season structure, being restricted to three zones and 23 periods, is similar to the conservative season structure used in 2023 and allows for better in-season run monitoring.
- The proposed hours match the longer duration periods requested by industry in 2020 to increase the likelihood that a suitable tide will occur within the fishing period.
- Landings will be sampled to collect biological data.

Tributary Research-Level Recreational Smelt Fisheries

- During 2014–2017 and 2020–2022, limited recreational fisheries occurred in the Cowlitz River. The fishery was restricted to 1–5 days annually (5–6 hours per day). During this timeframe, the Sandy River was only open in 2014 and 2015 (2–4 days annually; 6 hours per day). Annual recreational harvest averaged 133,153 pounds (range 541–290,770) with an average exploitation rate of 1.35% (range 0.03–2.77%). There was no recreational smelt fishing opportunity in 2018 or 2019.
- During 2023 there were no recreational fisheries in the Cowlitz River. Peak abundance of smelt was observed during late-March and a recreational fishery would have run the risk of potentially catching spring Chinook smolts released from the Cowlitz Salmon Hatchery.
- A recreational fishery took place in the Sandy River on March 30, 2023 and harvested 55,595 pounds.
- At this time, Washington and Oregon are not recommending recreational smelt fisheries in the Cowlitz or Sandy rivers. Staff will determine if fisheries are warranted after additional freshwater abundance indicators become available.

FUTURE MEETINGS

- A Compact Hearing is scheduled for 10 AM February 13, 2024 via teleconference to consider Select Area (winter, spring, and summer season) and treaty commercial fisheries.
- A hybrid Joint State Hearing is scheduled for 10 AM February 21, 2024 to consider mainstem Columbia River recreational spring Chinook fisheries. The hearing will be held at the City of Vancouver Water Resources Education Center (4600 SE Columbia Way, Vancouver, WA 98661) and a teleconference call-in option will be available.