

9. White Sturgeon Management Annual Review – (Briefing)

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“GREEN SHEET”

Meeting dates:	January 6, 2012 Meeting
Agenda item #9:	White Sturgeon Management Annual Review
Staff Contact:	Pat Frazier, Region 5 Fish Program Manager (Fish Program)
Presenter(s):	Pat Frazier, Region 5 Fish Program Manager (Fish Program) Guy Norman, Region 5 Director (Director’s Office)

The 2011-2013 Lower Columbia Sturgeon Management Policy (C-3001) states that given the uncertainty about the current state of the Columbia River white sturgeon population, the Commission is adopting a precautionary approach to management. Additionally, the policy requires that the Director will provide an annual review for the Commission, as an essential component of this precautionary approach, to include updated information on:

- stock status;
- predation rates;
- review of in-season management actions;
- accounting of fish left unharvested;
- review of sturgeon harvest in areas outside of the lower Columbia River;
- by-catch in all fisheries;
- recommended management changes; and
- other pertinent information

Some specific information regarding stock status, predation rates, review of in-season management and accounting for fish left unharvested is presented below. Additional information will be provided at the January Commission meeting regarding all of the aforementioned topics.

The downward trend in abundance of the legal-size (38-54 inch fork length) segment of the population observed in recent years continued into 2011 as expected. The preliminary projection for 2012 was for an increase in abundance of the legal-size segment of the population; however, that expectation has changed and the abundance of the legal-size segment of the population is projected to further decline in 2012 before increasing in 2013.

The number of sea lions present in the area just below Bonneville Dam decreased in 2011; however, observed and projected predation mortalities to white sturgeon increased in 2011. During 2011 predation monitoring efforts were expanded to include the 15 miles of the Columbia River from Rooster Rock State Park in Oregon upstream to the confluence of Tanner Creek just below Bonneville Hatchery in Oregon. Additionally, data analyses were completed that estimated the number for sturgeon mortalities resulting from sea lion predation occurring in the entire lower Columbia River from Bonneville Dam downstream to the mouth at Buoy 10. Sturgeon mortalities from sea lion predation are expected to increase through 2014 with the majority of the mortalities occurring to the 2-4 foot size range.

A Joint State Accord on Sturgeon Management for 2011-2013 was adopted to guide management actions during that 3-year period. The Joint State Accord set forth prescriptive maximum harvest limit of 17,000 fish or 22.5% exploitation rate, whichever is less. For 2011, fisheries were managed to remain below the 22.5% exploitation rate limit. Conservative management actions in 2011 resulted in an actual exploitation rate of 19.5%, which is 3% less than the prescribed maximum exploitation rate of 22.5%. For 2011 the number of fish available for harvest totaled 15,640 fish between 38-54 inches in fork length. Actual harvest in 2011 totaled 14,488, which resulted in 1,152 legal-sized fish unharvested. As per the Joint State Accord the 1,152 unharvested fish will not be included in the harvest limit for 2012 as has occurred in past years.

Policy issue(s) you are bringing to the Commission for consideration:

Provide annual briefing on lower Columbia River Sturgeon Management as per Policy C-3001

Public involvement process used and what you learned

- Development of past Joint State Accords concerning Columbia River sturgeon management has a good track record of high levels of public involvement. For the 2011 policy, several opportunities are provided for public involvement, including testifying at Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission meetings, testifying at Columbia River Compact hearings and providing input at public meetings.
 - For 2012 exploitation rate determinations and fishery management decisions we will continue the transparent management regime conducted in 2011. Meetings with the Columbia River Commercial and Recreational Advisory Groups were conducted on October 27, 2011. Based on past experience the Columbia River Advisory Groups have been a productive environment for disseminating information and receiving input regarding management alternatives.
 - Additional public meetings are not envisioned at this time. Modifications to fishery seasons and regulations will likely not require public meeting because the fishery modifications will not require large scale restructuring of current fisheries. Public will have an opportunity to provide input at the January 6-7 Commission meeting and the Columbia River Compact Hearing scheduled of January 26, 2012. Past experience has shown that Compact Hearings are a good environment to receive public input and implement Commission policy in collaboration with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.
 - Staff will conduct public and Columbia River Advisory Group meetings as needed to obtain additional input regarding management decisions.
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Action requested:

NA

Draft motion language:

NA

Justification for Commission action:

NA

Form revised 10/25/07

FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION

POLICY DECISION

**POLICY TITLE: 2011-2013 Lower Columbia
Sturgeon Management**

POLICY NUMBER: C-3001

Supersedes: 2010 Lower Columbia
Sturgeon Management C-3001

Effective Date: January 1, 2011
Termination Date: December 31, 2013

See Also: C-3608

Approved by: *Miranda Wecker*, CHAIR
Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission, 01/21/2011

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for management of the Lower Columbia River white sturgeon population and fisheries.

Definition and Intent

The Lower Columbia River white sturgeon population inhabits the waters of the Columbia River and tributaries downstream of Bonneville Dam and migrates into ocean and coastal estuaries. The intent of the policy is to provide consistent management guidelines that promote a healthy population.

General Policy Statement

Manage the Lower Columbia River white sturgeon population with conservation and fishery management objectives that are consistent with a healthy population.

Policy Guidelines

Lower Columbia Sturgeon Conservation Objectives:

- Provide recruitment and regulatory protection to increase the abundance of the spawning population.
- Manage with a precautionary approach due to uncertainties in population parameters.
- Manage for an annual combined sport and commercial harvest of white sturgeon to provide measurable population growth to achieve the goals of: (1) fully seeded habitats and (2) full representation of each age class within the population.
- Population Monitoring:
 - Continue young-of-the-year (YOY) sampling to track spawning success.
 - Evaluate legal-size abundance methodology to improve accuracy of estimates.
 - Continue to monitor sea lion predation for incorporation into stock status evaluations.

Fishery Management Objectives:

- Manage Lower Columbia River sturgeon fisheries through a three-year agreement with Oregon for 2011-2013.
- Maintain concurrent Washington and Oregon regulations in the Columbia River.

- Manage fisheries over the next three years in a manner that takes into consideration projected recruitment, with the objective of increasing abundance of the legal size segment, and increasing escapement into the spawning segment of the population. Management should be based on consideration of all mortality factors, including sea lion predation and both recreational and commercial fishery related mortalities.
- The harvest level for 2011-2013 fisheries will be reduced from the 2010 level to the extent that the reduction:
 - Addresses the downward trend in legal size abundance expected through 2011.
 - Accounts for increased predation by sea lions.
 - Addresses uncertainty in expected increased recruitment to legal-size in the near term (2012-2014).
 - Addresses expected low recruitment to legal-size beginning in 2015-2016.
 - Provides for fishery stability.
- Maintain the 80/20 sport/commercial harvest allocation.
- Maintain viable and diverse recreational and commercial fishing opportunities.
- Develop sport fishery regulations consistent with the following objectives:
 - Minimize emergency in-season action.
 - Balance catch between estuary and non-estuary fisheries and maintain a diverse array of sturgeon fishing opportunity.
 - Maintain fishery monitoring and management capabilities.
- Develop commercial fishery regulations consistent with the following objectives:
 - Optimize economic value (adjust to market needs).
 - Spread harvest opportunity throughout the year.
 - Minimize impacts to green sturgeon listed under the Endangered Species Act.
- Provide sufficient sturgeon spawning sanctuaries or other protection measures where and when appropriate.
- Conduct research, within available resources, to assess spawner and sublegal abundance and to quantify impacts of commercial and recreational fisheries on these abundances.
- Manage sturgeon harvests outside the mainstem lower Columbia River consistent with Lower Columbia River sturgeon conservation and management needs.
- Provide appropriate added protective measures to prevent further decline of green sturgeon.
- Limit incidental impacts on other species.

Annual Review

Given the degree of uncertainty about the current state of the Columbia River white sturgeon, including the impact of population stress factors such as increased predation and decreased food base, the Commission is adopting a precautionary approach to management. The Director will provide an annual review for the Commission, as an essential component of this precautionary approach, to include updated information on:

- stock status;
- predation rates;
- review of in-season management actions;
- accounting of fish left unharvested;
- review of sturgeon harvest in areas outside the mainstem lower Columbia River;
- by-catch in all fisheries;
- recommended management changes; and
- other pertinent information.

Delegation of Authority

The Commission delegates the authority to the Director to develop and negotiate a new three-year (2011-2013) Lower Columbia Sturgeon Management Accord that is consistent with these policies and objectives. Additionally, the Commission delegates the authority to the Director, through the Columbia River Compact, to set seasons for recreational and commercial fisheries in the Columbia River, and to adopt permanent and emergency regulations to implement these fisheries. The Director shall work with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to achieve implementation of this Commission action in a manner that results in concurrent regulations between the two states. The Director shall consult with the Commission Chair if it becomes necessary to deviate from the Commission's policy to achieve concurrent regulations with Oregon.