

White Sturgeon Management Annual Review –(Briefing)

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“GREEN SHEET”

Meeting dates: December 14, 2012 Meeting

Agenda item: Review of Lower Columbia River Sturgeon Management Policy C-3001 – (Briefing)

Staff Contact: Cindy LeFleur (Fish Program)

Presenter(s): Cindy LeFleur, Region 5 Fish Program Manager (Fish Program)
Brad James, Region 5 Sturgeon Manager (Fish Program)

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 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

Stock Status

The downward trend in abundance of the legal-size (38-54 inch fork length) segment of the population observed in recent years continued into 2012 as expected. Catch rates over the past four years of both legal-size fish and of sublegal-size fish in the recreational fishery indicate that both segments of the population have begun to stabilize at low abundance levels. The preliminary projection for 2013 is for a slight increase in abundance of the legal-size segment of the population from 2012.

Predation Rates

The number of Steller sea lions present in the area just below Bonneville Dam decreased in 2011 and remained at similar levels in 2012. Observed actual consumption of white sturgeon decreased in 2012. The 2013 modeled population projection assumes an increase in mortalities from sea lions through 2014, with the majority of the mortalities occurring in the 2-4 foot size range.

In-season Management/Harvest

The Joint State Accord on Sturgeon Management for 2011-2013 was amended for 2012, reducing the harvest rate guideline from 22.5% to 16%. For 2012 the number of fish available for harvest totaled 10,088 legal-sized fish. Some modifications were made to sport fishery seasons to remain within the overall guideline.

Fishery	Guideline	Harvest	Remaining
Sport	8,008	7,860	148
Commercial	2,080	1,906	174
Total	10,088	9,766	322

By-Catch

Commercial and sport fisheries were monitored for by-catch during the fall of 2012. Preliminary results are consistent with past observations. Final report will be completed in early 2013.

Recommended Changes From Columbia River Fishery Management Workgroup

The work group, made up of representatives from Washington and Oregon, recommended that the two Commissions consider non-retention sport and commercial fisheries for white sturgeon in the lower Columbia River, Washington and Oregon coastal areas and Puget Sound, to protect lower Columbia River-origin white sturgeon.

Other Information

Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission has taken/or is expected to take the following actions in 2012:

- September 7, 2012 meeting: adopted a 2-fish annual statewide white sturgeon limit, effective January 1, 2013;
- December 7, 2012 meeting: is expected to consider adoption of a rule prohibiting white sturgeon retention in the Columbia River and tributaries downstream of Bonneville Dam and for Oregon coastal estuaries and river systems, effective January 1, 2013.

Circle Hooks

The Commission has been provided with a briefing on circle hooks and their use relative to white sturgeon. A review of the literature suggests that the use of circle hooks in fisheries for various fish species may result in reduced harm/mortality compared to other hook types. During the 2012 public outreach process, constituents were asked to comment on the use of circle hooks. About 35% of respondents supported implementing a circle-hook requirement.

Zone 6 Management

White sturgeon populations in the Zone 6 management area (Bonneville Dam upstream to McNary Dam) are less productive than the population downstream of the dam, but each population is healthy enough to support modest sport and tribal commercial harvest fisheries. The dams isolate the fish into separate populations that are managed as such through the *United States v Oregon* Management Agreement. A change to retention opportunity downstream of Bonneville Dam has the potential to shift angling effort to the impoundments and staff will closely monitor the recreational fishery for such an event.

Annual Information

Detailed information regarding stock status and harvest is included in "Lower Columbia River White Sturgeon – Stock Assessment and Fishery Management – 2012 Update."

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

The current policy C-3001, provides the appropriate guidance for sturgeon conservation and further delegates authority to the Director to develop and negotiate management actions through the 2011-2013 Lower Columbia Sturgeon Management Accord. The Director shall work with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to achieve implementation of this Commission action in a manner that results in concurrent regulations between the two states, including implementation of emergency and permanent regulations.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

Department staff co-hosted with ODFW three public meetings on sturgeon management for the lower Columbia River and hosted three public meetings for the Washington coast and Puget Sound

- Portland (July 17)
 - Longview (July 18)
 - Astoria (July 19)
 - Raymond (July 24)
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- Montesano (July 31)
- Puget Sound at Mill Creek (July 26)
- Staff presented information on population status and fishery management and solicited input on future management preferences. Attendees were also asked to fill out a questionnaire soliciting additional input. Questions addressed population status and management objectives as well as fishery management and objectives.
- The majority of respondents supported the broader goals of protecting spawners and of increasing population abundance.
- Most respondents wanted to maintain catch-and-keep fisheries in all three areas (Columbia River (75%), (Washington coast and Puget Sound (63%)), however; some attendees believed that the status of the population warranted transitioning to catch-and-release only fisheries.

Several potential changes to statewide white sturgeon rules were included in the 2013-2014 Sportfishing Rule Proposal process. The options mentioned included: 1) changes in areas and/or times open to retention, including switching to catch-and-release only fisheries; 2) changes to size limits; 3) changing to a 2-fish annual limit; and 4) changes to terminal gear restrictions (i.e. circle hook requirement, etc.).

Next Steps

Given the information presented above on stock status and the authority delegated to the Director, if the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission adopts a non-retention rule, the intention is to move forward with the proposals for the permanent rule making process and develop rules to initiate non-retention fisheries beginning January 2013.

Action requested:

Affirm the current direction of the staff and provide Director with any additional guidance.

Draft motion language:

NA

Justification for Commission action:

NA

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.