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## Summary Sheet

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**Meeting dates:** February 28, 2025

**Agenda item:** Petition: Sauk and Skagit Rivers wild steelhead catch and release fishery rule change proposal

**Presenter(s):** Edward Eleazer, Region 4 Fish Program Manager

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**Background summary:**

The Agency has received a rule-making petition seeking to reduce guide fishing effort in the Sauk and Skagit Rivers steelhead catch and release fishery. Portions of the petition would amend WAC 220-312-040. Additional rules would need to be established to accomplish all actions proposed in the petition which includes the following:

1. **Implementation of a Moratorium on Guides**

The petition proposes the following restrictions concerning fishing guides on the Sauk and Skagit River:

- **Option 1:** A complete moratorium on guides, effectively prohibiting all guide activities on the river system.
- **Option 2:** Limiting the number of fishing guides operating on the system.
- **Option 3:** Restricting the number of guides and the number of days they may fish on the river.
- **Option 4:** Requiring all guides to register and undergo training focused on proper catch and release techniques, ensuring the safety and conservation of wild steelhead populations. The training should also include best practices for river etiquette and methods to minimize ecological impact on the watershed.

2. **Expansion of Catch and Release Fishery**

The petition requests an expansion of the current Catch and Release fishery to extend to the Highway 9 Bridge on the Skagit River.

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**Staff recommendation:**

The Department sets fishing seasons and regulations for steelhead to maximize recreational opportunity consistent with meeting conservation objectives. The service provided by professional fishing guides offer a diverse opportunity for anglers to participate in fisheries where they may otherwise be excluded. These independent businesses also provide economic benefit to local, rural economies, their business community and support jobs. A moratorium on professional guides in the Sauk and Skagit River steelhead fishery could negatively impact these businesses and reduce public support for conservation efforts.

Expanding the footprint of the steelhead catch and release fishery on the Skagit River is currently not allowed under the 10-year Resource Management Plan (RMP). This RMP is the mechanism by which WDFW and tribal co-managers are authorized by NOAA Fisheries to allow these fisheries which would otherwise be prohibited under the Federal Endangered Species Act (ESA). NOAA Fisheries has reviewed the RMP for consistency with the ESA section 7 and published their findings in [Biological Opinion](https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/49172) (<https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/49172>)

Finally, the footprint of the fishery as it currently exists in the RMP was designed to protect winter steelhead kelts (post spawn adult steelhead) and Finney Creek summer steelhead in the Skagit River watershed.

Staff recommend denying the petition.

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**Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:**

Pursuant to RCW 34.05.330

Option A) deny the petition in writing, stating the reasons for the denial comments specifically addressing the concerns raised by the petitioners, Or

Option B) accept the petition and initiate rulemaking for the proposal to create a moratorium on guides on the Sauk and Skagit Rivers and expand the fishing area on the Skagit.

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**Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:**

No fiscal impact to the Agency.

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**Public involvement process used and what you learned:**

N/A

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**Action requested and/or proposed next steps:**

Department staff recommend the Director to deny the petition to create a moratorium on guides in the Sauk and Skagit Rivers and to deny the petition to expand the fishing area for the Skagit River catch and release fishery.

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**Draft motion language:**

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**Post decision communications plan:**

Post decision to website and notify petitioner in writing.