

# **Sturgeon Angler's Opinions on Lowering the Annual Limit for Sturgeon**

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife  
Fish Management Program  
Freshwater Fish Section

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## Abstract

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In October 2003, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) Commission considered the option of lowering the statewide annual limit for sturgeon from ten fish to five. This was intended to spread the catch over more anglers, and was also expected to allow a longer season for the retention (as opposed to catch-and-release) fishery for sturgeon in the Columbia River.

In order to assess angler attitudes toward the proposed change, WDFW contracted with Responsive Management to conduct a telephone survey of anglers who had reported sturgeon catch on their catch record cards during the 2001-2002 season. Anglers were asked whether they supported or opposed lowering the annual limit of sturgeon and were asked to quantify their support or opposition (strongly support, moderately support, neither support or oppose, moderately oppose, strongly oppose). Additional comments from survey respondents were also included. This information was provided to the WDFW Commission as part of their decision-making process. The rule was adopted and took effect with the beginning of the new license and catch record card season on April 1, 2004. A similar rule was adopted in Oregon, becoming effective at the beginning of their license year, on January 1, 2004.

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# Introduction

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Columbia River sturgeon fisheries are managed in conjunction with the State of Oregon on a harvest guideline system. For sport fishers, two types of seasons (catch-and-release and retention) are set each year. The goal is to allow as much time for retention fisheries as possible, while still staying within the harvest guideline. This fishery has become increasingly popular with anglers from both states in the past two decades, putting pressure on managers to provide fishing opportunity, while also protecting the resource for future benefits.

Annual limits have been part of the management strategy for sturgeon since 1986, when Oregon adopted a 30-fish annual limit. Washington adopted its first annual sturgeon limit of 15 in 1989, and Oregon followed suit in 1990. In 1994, both states reduced the annual sturgeon limit to 10 fish. In 2003, both states considered lowering the limit again, this time to 5 fish.

The proposed lower annual limit addresses allocation between anglers and is not a conservation issue. Managers expect that an annual limit of five fish for both Washington and Oregon anglers will increase the number of days per year that anglers are allowed to keep sturgeon. About 7% of Washington and Oregon anglers who harvest sturgeon typically retain six fish or more under the ten fish annual limit. Restricting these anglers to five fish annually should result in a 5% reduction in combined Washington and Oregon annual harvest.

The anticipated increase in days open to sturgeon retention under a five fish annual limit was derived from data on numbers of angler trips per day and harvest per angler trip. In the estuary part of the Columbia River, from the mouth upstream to the Wauna powerline crossing at river mile 40 near Cathlamet, Washington, it is estimated that an 18,000 sturgeon guideline would support an additional 2,300 angler trips and the retention season could be extended by two days in July. In the area from the Wauna powerlines to Bonneville Dam, the sport fishery was modeled where sturgeon retention was restricted to 3 days each week. A 12,000 sturgeon guideline should support an additional 5,700-8,600 angler trips and the fishery could probably be extended by 10-15 days.

As part of the public involvement process for this proposed rule change, WDFW hired Responsive Management to conduct a telephone survey of sturgeon anglers to find out whether they would support the lower annual limit as one way of extending the sturgeon retention fishery.

## Methodology

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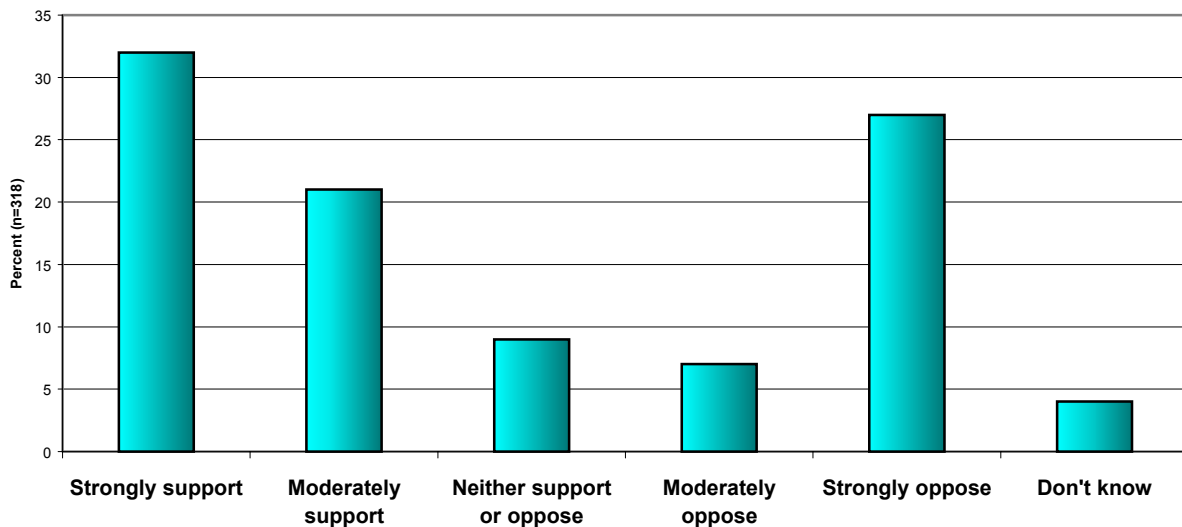
The telephone survey was conducted in early July 2003. Angler names and phone numbers, taken from Washington catch record cards returned by anglers who reported having caught sturgeon in the 2001-2002 sport season, were provided to Responsive Management by WDFW. The survey questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was developed jointly by WDFW and Responsive Management. Anglers were read a short paragraph explaining the annual limit proposal and the possible extension of the retention fishery that could result. They were asked “Do you support or oppose lowering the annual limit to five sturgeon from the current limit of ten?” They were then given six choices to describe support or lack of support. The six choices were: strongly support, moderately support, neither support or oppose, moderately oppose, strongly oppose, or don’t know. After answering the question, surveyors were instructed to record additional comments (up to 240 characters) made by the survey respondents.

# Survey Results

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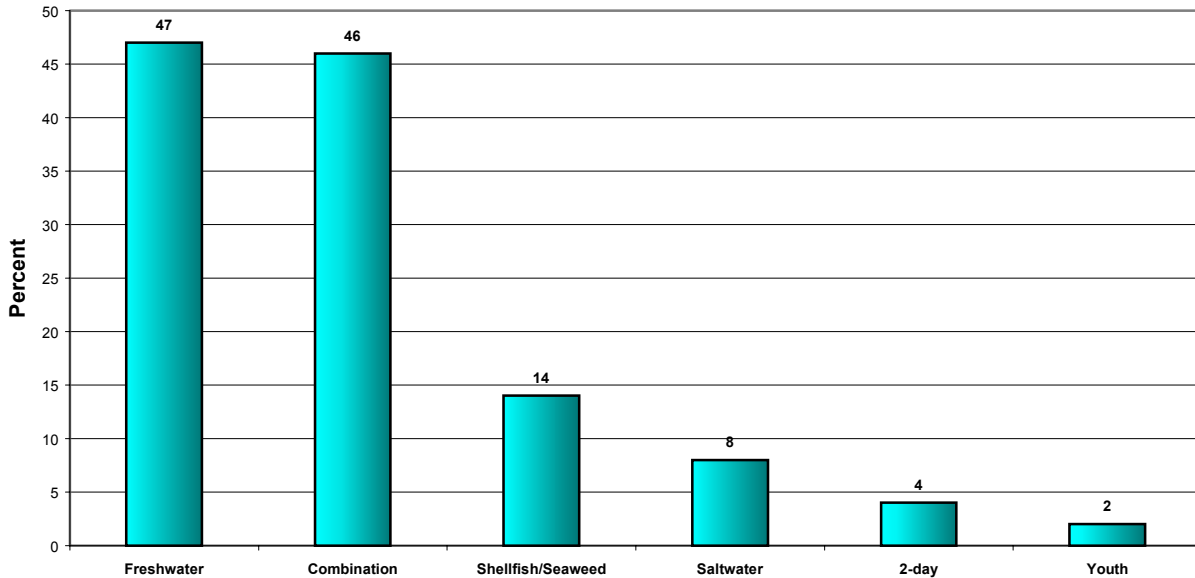
Responsive Management provided us with 318 completed surveys. Of these, 32% strongly supported lowering the annual limit. Moderate support was chosen by 21% of the respondents, while 9% neither supported or opposed the proposal. Only 7% moderately opposed the change, while 27% professed strong opposition and 4% did not know (Figure 1). Overall, a small majority (53%) supported the proposal, while 34% opposed it. A total of 13% either didn't support or oppose the proposal, or simply didn't know. An interesting dynamic within the data is that for both support and opposition, more anglers had strong opinions than moderate ones.

**Figure 1: Do you support or oppose lowering the annual limit to five sturgeon from the current limit of ten?**



Although it was not asked in the survey, interviewers recorded the respondent's gender during the survey. Most respondents (89%) were male. Interviewers also noted the type of licenses responding anglers had purchased. Most of the anglers interviewed had purchased either a freshwater or combination license (47% and 46%, respectively). A smaller number also had purchased a shellfish/seaweed or saltwater license (14% and 8%). Four percent of those interviewed had temporary, 2-day licenses and 2% had youth combination licenses. The license type data is shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: License Types of Survey Respondents - Multiple Responses Allowed**



Of the 312 survey respondents, 121 (38%) took the opportunity to make a comment after answering the survey question. Many of the comments (64 comments, or 53%) had to do with concerns about the commercial fishery for sturgeon on the Columbia River. Currently, 80% of the sturgeon catch is allocated to sport fisheries, with 20% going to commercial fisheries. Nevertheless, many respondents blamed the net fisheries for shortened seasons and other rules restricting the sport fishery such as the proposed decrease in the annual limit. Nine of the respondents mentioned the charter fleet that targets sturgeon (typically less than 10 boats on weekdays and up to 25 boats on weekends), most suggesting that they take too many fish. Another group (6) mentioned that more enforcement of the current rules was needed. Additional comments ranged from support of the proposal to general criticisms of the department's management of the fishery. A full list of all the comments received is provided in Appendix 2.

# Appendix 1 – Survey

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1. PRESS RETURN WHEN INTERVIEW BEGINS  
TIMER STARTS AFTER THIS SCREEN START
2. Time when interview began TIME1 1:1-5  
|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|
3. DOS SURVEY NAME SNAME 1:6  
(CHECK ONLY ONE ANSWER)  
|\_| 1. WASTRGN
4. Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm calling on behalf of  
the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife to ask  
you a question about sturgeon fishing in Washington. We are  
not selling anything and the survey will just take about 1  
minute. Will you help us out with the survey? CONPER 1:7-8  
(CHECK ONLY ONE ANSWER)  
|\_| 1. Correct person, good time to do survey (GO TO QUESTION 6)  
|\_| 2. Bad time/schedule recall (CB - do not save) (GO TO  
QUESTION 5)  
|\_| 3. AM, NA, BZ (do not save)  
|\_| 4. TM  
|\_| 5. RF  
|\_| 6. NE  
|\_| 7. DS  
|\_| 8. BG  
|\_| 9. DL  
|\_| 10. Bad Number (missing digit, begins with zero, etc.)  
SKIP TO QUESTION 17  
=====



- 5. When would be a more convenient time to call you back?  
Thank you for your time.

WHENCALL

ENTER DAY AND TIME ON CALLSHEET (CB)

SKIP TO QUESTION 17

=====

- 6. Our records indicate that you fished for sturgeon in the past 2 years in Washington, is this correct?

VERIFY 1:9

(CHECK ONLY ONE ANSWER)

- 1. Invalid answer. Select another. (GO TO QUESTION 6)
- 2. Yes (GO TO QUESTION 8)
- 3. No
- 4. Don't know

- 7. I'm sorry, but right now we are only interviewing those anglers that have fished for sturgeon in Washington during the past 2 years. Thank you for your time and cooperation.

SORRY

PRESS ENTER TO CONTINUE; RECORD AS NE

SKIP TO QUESTION 17

=====

- 8. Managing sturgeon fisheries has become very complex over the past couple of decades, as angling effort switched from salmon to sturgeon. The popularity of current sport sturgeon fishing easily exceeds the supply of sturgeon. Sport fishery management on the Columbia River has evolved into using annual quotas by area (estuary and non-estuary) to prevent harvest from hindering population growth. This approach divides the year into seasons when sturgeon can be kept and periods when they must be released.

BACKGRND

PRESS ENTER TO CONTINUE

- 9. Washington and Oregon are considering reducing the statewide annual limit for sturgeon from ten to five as a means of increasing the number of days anglers are allowed to keep sturgeon. On the Columbia River this would add an additional 10-15 days to the above-Wauna (Cathlamet to Bonneville) retention season and about 2 days to the below-Wauna (estuary) retention season. If adopted, the regulation would take effect April 1, 2004.

Do you support or oppose lowering the annual limit to five sturgeon from the current limit of ten?

(READ SCALE AS NECESSARY; PROMPT FOR DEGREE)

LIMIT 1:10

(CHECK ONLY ONE ANSWER)

- 1. Invalid answer. Select another. (GO TO QUESTION 9)
- 2. Strongly support
- 3. Moderately support
- 4. Neither support nor oppose
- 5. Moderately oppose
- 6. Strongly oppose
- 7. Don't know

- 10. That's the end of the questionnaire, thank you very much for your time and cooperation!

(ENTER ANY ADDITIONAL COMMENTS; IN FIRST PERSON; 240 CHARACTERS)

END 1:11-250

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SKIP TO QUESTION 12

=====

- 11. YOU DID NOT USE YOUR SPACE BAR

NOSPAC1

PRESS ENTER TO TRY AGAIN

12. ENTER LICENSE TYPE(S) FROM CALLSHEET

LICTYP 2:1-6

(CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

- 1. fw
- 2. sw
- 3. sh
- 4. cm
- 5. 2d
- 6. yu

IF (#12 = 0) GO TO #11

13. OBSERVE AND RECORD RESPONDENT'S GENDER

GENDER 2:7

(CHECK ONLY ONE ANSWER)

- 1. Invalid answer. Select another. (GO TO QUESTION 13)
- 2. Don't know
- 3. Male
- 4. Female

14. TIME INTERVIEW WAS COMPLETED

ENDTIME 2:8-12

|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|

15. Please enter your initials in LOWERCASE ONLY!

INTVRINT 2:13-15

|\_|\_|\_|\_|

16. Enter the area code and telephone number of number dialed.

TELEPHON 2:16-25

|\_|\_|\_|\_|-|\_|\_|\_|\_|-|\_|\_|\_|\_|\_|

LOWEST VALUE = 1

17. SAVE OR ERASE INTERVIEW.  
DO NOT ERASE A COMPLETED INTERVIEW!

FINISH 2:26

(CHECK ONLY ONE ANSWER)

- 1. Save answers (GO TO QUESTION 19)
- 2. Erase answers
- 3. Review answers (GO TO QUESTION 4)

18. ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO ERASE THIS INTERVIEW?  
ONLY ERASE IF: CB, AM, NA, BZ

MAKESURE 2:27

(CHECK ONLY ONE ANSWER)

- 1. No, do not erase the answers (GO TO QUESTION 17)
- 2. Yes, erase this interview

19. Date call was made

INTVDAT 2:28-35

|\_|\_|\_|\_|-|\_|\_|-|\_|\_|  
Year Month Day

SAVE IF (#17 = 1)

## Appendix 2 – Additional Comments from Respondents

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The charters seem to kill off a lot of sturgeon compared to the anglers.
I oppose [lowering the limit] unless they cut back on the commercial fisherman.
What they should do is stop anglers from being able to fish the over-sized fish. It hurts them. It affects breeding.
Get the nets out of the river.
How can they measure the sturgeon population by flying over and counting the number of boats? A 5-sturgeon limit is enough. I worry that gill-netters will come in and get the big fish.
I have never come close to the limit, so it is fine with me.
I spend a lot of money on boats and tackle, and they just keep taking things away!
I think they are not managing the commercial anglers well. Commercial anglers are getting more than private anglers. The commercial nets ruin the fishing for private anglers. Private anglers would support the local economy better.
It isn't good for the fisheries to close the season during times such as Spring Break for college kids.
The longer retention is good.
With only five, it gives you less fishing time. We need to cut down the commercial fishing, including charter anglers. Now they are concentrating on sturgeon.
Five is too little; I would lower it to seven or eight.
A little more enforcement of regulations couldn't hurt.
Push the size limit up from 42 to 45 or 46 inches.
As long as gill netters and charter companies are allowed to take sportsmen's fish, I oppose any reduction of any sturgeons.
[I support lowering the limit] as long as it cuts down on commercial fishing.
As they keep the salmon fishing going, I'm ok.
Check the boats out better - people don't punch their tickets and are catching more fish than they're supposed to.
Cut back on the other stuff and give anglers a chance.
[I support lowering the limit] only if commercial/tribal fishing is limited too.
I think something ought to be done with the catch and release of over-sized fish, as it stresses and may cause injury to the fish. These are the fish we need to protect for breeding. I also see retention-small-fish regulations need to be enforced.
I can't see putting gill netters into the river; we get fined, whereas they get away with lots of things.
Because we're not pulling the nets out for the Indians, and commercial fishing still happens, and the sportsmen are paying for the majority of it, I don't see where we're getting the benefits; the license is a waste of time and money.
Get the gill netters out of the damn river.
I agree with lowering the sport quota but believe harvest by commercial fishermen needs to stop. There are not enough fish to support commercial angling of sturgeon.
I hate to be restricted more, but between my wife and I, we'd still get 10 fish, and to eat 10 sturgeon in a year [would be difficult].

Charter boats are taking too many fish.
Give the sports fisherman more opportunities. The commercial fishers take all the fish.
Commercial fishing should be limited as well.
I am concerned about gill-net fishing and commercial/tribal fishing taking all the fish.
It [the limit] should be lowered less, as it affects the local economy.
I did not get to fish this spring. I think the nets need to come out, and they need to stop running charter boats and changing the size limit from 4ft to 5ft.
I don't even go anymore because of the commercial nets, etc.
[I support lowering the limit] as long as it would be enhancing the health of the sturgeon population.
I think bank-angling should be open all year, and I think they should restrict the amount that charter boats take enough to allow small-boat sport fisherman a better chance.
I'm uncomfortable about hearing that airplanes might be flying over and counting boats as an arbitrary count of harvest because they're probably understaffed.
Cut down the commercials! The money you get from us is really more than you get from the commercial netters, but the netters are ruining it for us!
I believe in conservation - if the population is suffering, something needs to be done. Five sturgeon should be enough for anyone.
I don't agree with the charter boats' taking fish; they have too high of a quota.
I support closing the seasons for a couple years. Gill netters are raping our rivers and are accidentally catching sturgeon.
Give information about the commercial fishing.
I don't see the benefit the gill netters are giving to society and the economy as opposed to the sport fishermen where we have to give up some fish/time to them; where the #!*** do they get the clout?
I never catch more than five anyways!! Ha ha ha ha ha!!!! What about the gill netters? How many fish do we lose to them? How would this regulation change affect them?
I only fish a few days the whole season.
I would rather see at least 7 as the limit; there's a lot of people (mostly foreign descent) taking little shakers, and there's no one from the Dept. to stop them.
I think they should fix the gill net problem before worrying about sturgeon.
I support any effort that shows positive results; you don't know until you try. I would like to see the fish last forever.
Get the gill netters.
I think a big majority of the problem is the gill netters and not the sportsmen, and I think their quotas should be cut as well. They wipe out the sturgeon, and they should be punished along with us.
I never get five to begin with.
I travel 800 miles to come to the Columbia to fish for a month and catch the 10-fish limit. I wouldn't come for a 5-fish limit, and I would be disappointed. Limit the commercial anglers.
I wonder why they're still taking commercially? We have to protect the fish.
If there is a problem with the fishery, then cut commercial as well.
I would set the limit to 2 or 3 a year or mostly catch-and-release because it takes so long for them to grow.
If commercial anglers are stopped from using nets, I will support [lowering the limit].

If the limit is reduced for sport fishing by 50%, then Indian/commercial fishing should also be reduced by 50%.
If size limit is maintained, then the population will level out.
If the commercial fishermen stick to their limit, then it's okay. Personally I would ban all commercial and sports fishing for 2 years.
I think they ought to reduce the limit for the commercial fishermen, too.
Limits for commercial anglers should be lowered as well.
If the sportsmen get their quota cut, what happens to the commercial quota? I would be apt to oppose it because the mortality rate is high even when commercial anglers release sturgeon.
I think you ought to make the gill netters quit getting them 4 or 5 times a year; I see the dead little ones floating in the water.
In the long term, they're [sturgeon] going to be the next endangered species; they're going to be harvested to death. I'd like to see it be all catch-and-release or at least some better options than just lowering the quota; the gill netters get them all.
Instead of block closures, have 3 or 4 days a week when you can retain fish, change the slot limit to 45-55 inches. And do something about the charters; they're killing 60 fish a day in one boat. Take the gill nets out of fresh water.
It'd be nice if they could change the size limit, move it up to between 5 and 6 feet from 4 feet.
I would like to be able to fish for longer periods of time.
It would be easier to manage if they got rid of the commercial nets.
Keep the gill netters out of the river, they are destroying it. I have no problem giving up 5 fish otherwise.
Leave it as it is. I've never seen so many sturgeon. I prefer sport catch-and-release anyway.
Manage and harvest can keep clients very happy.
They should limit the commercial catch more.
I think you should be able to catch one only and release the rest.
Lower the limits for the commercial fishermen, too.
The limit should be maybe 7 or 8.
Must change because the fisheries can't support current limits; I'm glad to see something will be done about it.
I support [lowering the limit] as long as commercial fishermen are also docked.
We wouldn't be having this conversation if it weren't for the gill nets in the Columbia. They're not in any other tributary or river anywhere!
My concern is that if the reduction would allow population increase, would the retention also increase?
Need a similar quota on charter boats and commercial fishing.
I would like to know what they're doing with the gill-netters.
It [lowering the limit] would give me more options for fishing and more opportunities.
Need to regulate the nets and get them out of the water. Until you do that, you shouldn't limit anyone.
[I support lowering the limit] only if they cut out the commercial fishing; I used to work commercial, and I know what they bring in.
Our license fees are going up, and the season seems to be decreasing. This year, I thought the sturgeon fishing ended on July 9 <sup>th</sup> , but it ended last Friday.
Reduce the number of days to fish during the week, such as what was done for salmon.

Need to regulate commercial anglers because they're going out on salmon opening and fishing the bottom and getting sturgeon on incidental catch.
Regulate the commercial fishermen.
I would like to see longer seasons. The netters should definitely be kept off the waters.
[The limit] should extend to the sub-legals.
I am sick of the commercial fishermen in the water.
The commercial fishers hurt the fish population.
Sturgeons being migratory, there's a lot of them being caught in the N. Puget Sound area (Stillginish River, etc.), and no one is recording them.
The decision [whether to lower the limit] should be based on scientific data, not necessarily an emotional reaction. I'm not qualified really to say what should or shouldn't happen.
There's a lot of sturgeon out there.
I would like to see them not be able to fish commercially for sturgeon.
They're doing too much sturgeon net fishing, and that's the cause of the problem.
It will only benefit the charters and the guides if you lower the limit to 5.
They need to reallocate from the commercial to the recreational.
They should stay the way they are, and the Fish and Game [Department] should get together and do better monitoring, clam digging, and writing tickets.
The Dept. gives the gill-netters a season when they take more fish than the sport anglers. If we cut our limits, then take them [gill netters] out of the water completely.
I think 10 is a good number, but 5 is a joke. No one will listen to [obey] the 5-fish limit; it will not work.
There isn't enough fish for everyone to keep what they want, so I'd rather see a healthy population and a reduced catch limit.
They're going to do it, anyway. I'd rather see it open year round.
I think there are too many fish being caught.
Try 7 instead of 5 first; instead of [cutting limit] in half all at once, if 7 is too many, then cut to 5.
Until commercial fishing is regulated, the Dept. is wasting time cutting sport limits.
I want to close the whole thing down for like 3 years and let the fish recover.
The limit could go even lower.
We'd have a lot more sturgeon if the Indians and gill-netters would stop taking them.
There is a problem with enforcement of these limits, particularly the Russians and Vietnamese are taking well over the limit—I have witnessed this too much over the last 8-10 years.
The Department absolutely needs to take commercial nets out of the waters!
We have the only gill-netters river in the country; without the sportsmen's dollars, the state couldn't support fishing programs; it's not fair that the gill-netters always get too much.
I would like to see when they're opening up, they would continue it into the summer.
With lowering the quota, we should eliminate bi-catch done by commercial fisheries.
With the slot we've got, there's no way the sport fisherman has a way of depleting the sturgeon. The only people who can do that are the commercial fishermen, and they already ruined the salmon.
Work on gill-netters!
There should never be a net in the Columbia River.
We need to keep the gill-netters from taking them.



You guys [the Game Dept.] screwed up the sturgeon fishing. Twenty years ago, you could legally hang three lines with 300 hooks each. I made a fuss about it at the Dept., and they said not to worry, because there will always be enough sturgeon.

There are a lot more sturgeon than those scientists say, so tell them to piss off.

You should have lowered it a long time ago.

This program receives Federal financial assistance from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. The U.S. Department of the Interior and its bureaus prohibit discrimination on the bases of race, color, national origin, age, disability and sex (in educational programs). If you believe that you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility, please write to:

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