

Director's Report



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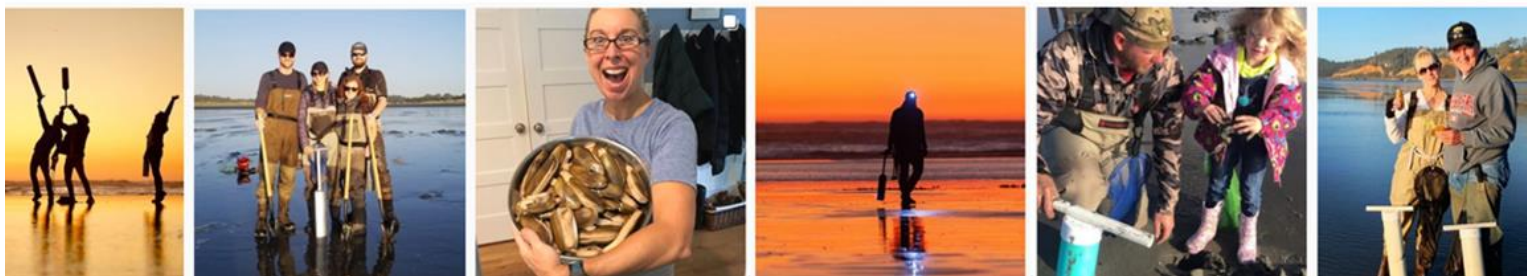
Razor Clam Harvest

Razor clam harvesting along the 58 miles of sandy beaches of Washington's open Pacific Coast has long been a family tradition for thousands of Washington residents. To insure sustainability of this unique resource, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) carefully manages razor clam populations. Seasons are set to allow for harvest openers during periods of low tides, each month, between October and May. In the fall and winter when low tides occur at night, thousands of clam diggers brave the elements to dig by lantern or flashlight. The better weather during springtime morning tides often means even more diggers headed to coastal beaches.

A major component of the Department's management of this iconic species is the work conducted by agency staff to complete a thorough population assessment each summer, following the close of the previous season. The data collected is used to set harvest quotas for the coming season.

Thanks to good ocean conditions allowing for the successful spawning and setting of razor clams, the 2019 summer assessment documented populations of harvestable-sized clams more abundant than any time in the last three decades. This has allowed fishery managers to offer an unusual number of digging opportunities so far during the 2019-20 recreational season. Even with the challenges winter weather can pose, intrepid harvesters have braved the elements to make over 175,000 digging trips and harvest over 2.5 million clams. There is a lot more to come. The Department has just announced a long list of dates through the end of April (with more dates likely to come in May) when diggers will have the chance to visit the coast to participate in this time-honored tradition – and very likely bring home limits of these tasty shellfish.

Along a portion of the Washington coast, the Department works closely with tribal fishery managers to ensure harvest opportunities for all. This includes tribal staff actively participating in summer harvest assessment work. In those areas, the harvest is shared equally.



With an epic razor clam season projected last year, the Marketing team set out to promote the great work of our coastal shellfish managers by engaging the public in a creative way – pitting the clam gunners against the clam shovel enthusiasts. The results have been overwhelmingly positive and a breath of fresh air for the agency. Connecting with the public improves relevancy of the agency!

We have partnered with local and national radio personality Fitz in the Morning from 98.9 The Bull, who has done a great job with our radio ads for the Razor Clam Face-Off. Partnering with public figures and industry influencers

increases agency relevancy and trust with the general public and provides organic awareness growth. Fitz is excited to work with us, and staff are currently developing concepts to collaborate on our 2020 Statewide Trout Derby campaign.

Public engagement for the Face-Off continues to increase as we enter the spring digging season, and we expect to see an increase in families on the beach as the daytime digs become the norm. Our YouTube “mockumentary” series continues to engage diggers, with the [latest video](#) at 38,000 views on the [WDFW Facebook page](#).

Results by month comparing 2018 razor clam license sales to 2019:

- September up **51%** (\$30,065)
- October up **15%** (\$42,936)
- November up **20%** (\$37,679)
- December up **20%** (\$23,882)

Comparing Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 to FY 2020 to date, razor clam license sales are up 57% (\$94,926) and shellfish is up 9% (\$64,439).



Commercial Whale Watching Licensing Program

In spring 2019, the Washington State Legislature directed the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to develop rules for a new commercial whale-watching licensing program enacted via Senate Bill 5577: a bill concerning the protection of Southern Resident Orca Whales from vessels. The purpose of creating and defining rules for a new licensing program is to enable sustainable whale watching while reducing the impacts of vessel noise and disturbance so whales can effectively forage, rest, and socialize.

In October 2019, the Department solicited applicants for an ad-hoc advisory committee to help develop these rules and processes. The Advisory Committee consists of members of the whale watching industry, including the Pacific Whale Watching Association, the on-the-water education and monitoring group SoundWatch, the nonprofit community (including the Washington Environmental Council, Seattle Aquarium, and Friends of the San Juans), and the public. The Advisory Committee began meeting in January 2020 and will conduct the bulk of its deliberations between now and May, with the hopeful result of a consensus recommendation to the Department regarding rules for the new licensing program.

An Intergovernmental Coordination Group including Department Enforcement, NOAA, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Puget Sound Partnership, and Canadian counterparts from Transport Canada and the Canadian Department of Fisheries meets in parallel to discuss issues around administration, implementation, and coordination. Finally, an independent panel of scientists is in formation by the Washington State Academy of Sciences to determine the best available science that will inform the rulemaking.

Draft language for the rules will be shared and refined over the summer of 2020, and the public comment period will follow in fall 2020, with expected adoption of the rules by Jan. 1, 2021.

Chehalis Basin Flood Control EIS

The Chehalis River Basin Flood Control Zone District (FCZD; Project Applicant) is proposing a new flood reduction facility (a.k.a. dam) and temporary reservoir (filled only during major floods) on the upper Chehalis River upstream of the town of Pe Ell. The Department of Ecology is leading development of the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) Draft EIS for the facility. The Department is an agency of expertise and provided significant contributions related to modeling, field data collection, focused studies, and analysis to support development of the Draft EIS.

Based on the Draft EIS, which was released February 27, the proposed flood reduction facility would, if not mitigated, have significant adverse environmental impacts to fish and aquatic species and habitats, water and earth resources, riparian habitat, wetlands, recreation, and wildlife species and habitats, among other resources.

The Draft EIS is an objective, science-based technical document that will help decision makers, project applicants, and the public understand how the entire proposal will affect the environment. The FCZD/Project Applicant has initiated preparation of a draft mitigation framework for the proposed facility. The Department will actively work with the FCZD on developing mitigation, with the caveat that the feasibility and sufficiency of mitigation are still unknown.

The EIS is not a decision document. The Department and others will use the EIS to determine the feasibility and appropriate scale of mitigation, as well as how the proposed dam may or may not fit into a larger Chehalis Basin Strategy to reduce flood damage and restore salmon, steelhead, and other aquatic species. The Chehalis Strategy, assuming a final agreement is reached, will include an Aquatic Species Restoration Plan on top of mitigation for any flood control structures. The strategy is currently under negotiation at the Chehalis Basin Board (which includes a Department representative as a non-voting member), and a board decision on at least its content and phasing is anticipated by the end of the 2020.

Ecology is holding a 61-day public comment period for the SEPA Draft EIS on the Proposed Project from February 27 through April 27, 2020. Ecology anticipates the SEPA Final EIS will be published in 2021. The Department is coordinating closely with Ecology on communications and public meetings.

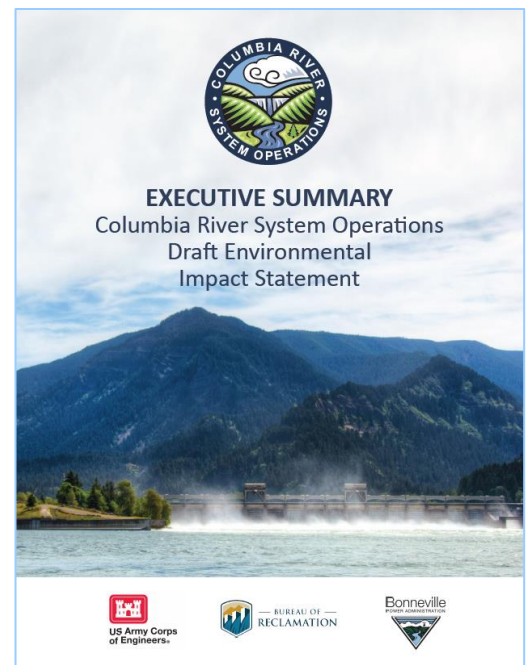
Columbia River Power System: Recent Developments

There have been several developments regarding the federal Columbia-Snake River dams in the last couple of months. A draft Columbia River System Operations Environmental Impact Statement (CRSO EIS) was released on Friday, February 28. Already, multiple regional interests are saying that the EIS, while a step forward in terms of dam operations, will not be sufficient to resolve a long-standing controversy over salmon and dam management on the Columbia and Snake rivers.

The draft EIS embraces the "flexible spill" operation negotiated in 2018 by Washington (including Department staff), Oregon, Nez Perce Tribe, Bonneville Power Administration, Army Corps of Engineers, and Bureau of Reclamation. That operation, which calls for increasing the proportion of water routed over dam spillways 16 hours a day and reducing "spill" for the other eight hours, is expected to provide in the neighborhood of a 25% improvement in Snake River spring/summer Chinook Smolt-to-Adult returns (SARs) relative to pre-2012 dam operations. This should get

SARs closer to Northwest Power and Conservation Council goals, but will remain short of the levels needed for recovery. In recognition of both the progress represented by the flexible spill operation and its limitations, many elected leaders and stakeholders are calling for a regional collaboration that seeks to restore abundant salmon and steelhead while protecting clean, affordable, and reliable energy and reliable and affordable transportation and irrigation infrastructure for agriculture.

One call for regional collaboration came from a letter to four northwest Governors signed by an unlikely mix of energy utility, port, and conservation interests. The letter calls for using the CRSO EIS as a "springboard to collaboratively develop a long-term vision and strategic plan" to recover salmon and protect other interests. Another letter from Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to Gov. Jay Inslee echoes the stakeholders' call for collaboration and recognizing stakeholder needs, but goes further in stating a strong belief that lower Snake River dam breaching must be part of any long-term plan. These letters came as a consultant was wrapping up a process funded



by the state legislature and led by Gov. Inslee's office to explore stakeholder hopes and fears around dam breaching. The consultant's report will be released March 6. Meanwhile, U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson (R-ID) is actively exploring federal legislation to reform the Northwest Power Act to provide more certainty for both Bonneville Power Administration finances and salmon recovery, and he has expressed a willingness to pursue lower Snake River dam breaching if that is what the region determines is necessary to restore Snake River salmon and steelhead.

Department staff is helping lead the state response to the draft EIS and will be involved in discussions about a potential regional collaboration around a long-term vision for the Columbia and Snake rivers.