

Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy – (Decision)

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Fish and Wildlife Commission Presentation Summary Sheet

Meeting date:

9/29/2023

Agenda item:

Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy

Presenter(s):

Kelly Cunningham, Chad Herring, Marlene Wagner, Kenneth Warheit

Background summary:

In the fall of 2014, the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC), supported by Department staff, initiated development of a salmon management policy for Willapa Bay. The intent of the policy was to provide Department staff with general guidance and management objectives for salmon management in Willapa Bay.

In June 2015, the Policy was adopted by the FWC as the *Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy – C-3622*. The FWC also requested a thorough review of the implementation and performance of the 2015 Policy. In December 2020, the *Comprehensive Evaluation of the Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy C-3622*, was accepted by the Commission and it was determined that revisions to the policy were warranted, starting a formal policy revision process.

The Commission has held 25 meetings specifically on Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy revisions, seven of which were open for public comment. Throughout this time, Department staff were asked to provide alternative policy language incorporating those initial topics of revision developed in the Comprehensive Review. The Fish Committee also provided a version of a policy document for Willapa Bay salmon management. After much analysis, comparison, and deliberation, a draft of a Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy was presented and discussed during two Fish Committee Meetings in January and May of 2023. In June of 2023, the Commission agreed the policy was ready to be put forth for final formal public comment. In August of 2023, staff provided a presentation summarizing the public comment, and further in-person public comment was heard. This meeting is reserved for the full Fish and Wildlife Commission to vote on a motion to approve the final draft Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy (C-3622) language.

Staff recommendation:

Approve the final draft Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy language.

Policy issue(s) and expected outcome:

The Commission will vote on a motion to approve the final draft Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy.

Fiscal impacts of agency implementation:

Not applicable.

Public involvement process used and what you learned:

Public involvement in the review was included throughout the policy review process and Department staff sought public input through twelve public or advisory group meetings as well as through the Willapa Bay Policy Review webpage. The meetings began in January of 2018 and concluded with a public meeting held via webinar on August 18, 2020. Since the Comprehensive review process was completed in December of 2020, the Commission has heard public comment seven times during the policy revision process, most recently in August of 2023. There was a formal written comment period on the final draft language from July 5 to August 7, 2023.

Action requested and/or proposed next steps:

Department staff will seek Commission approval for the final draft Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy.

Draft motion language:

I move to adopt the Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy (C-3622) as presented by staff.

Post decision communications plan:

Should the Commission approve the policy, the Department will communicate to stakeholders via the agency webpage and through a post-meeting press release.

Form revised 1-20-21

**FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION
POLICY DECISION**

**POLICY TITLE: Willapa Bay Salmon
Management**

POLICY NUMBER: C-XXXX

Supersedes: Policy C-3622

Effective Date:

See Also: Policy C-3622

Approved by:

Chair, Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission

Purpose

The purpose of this Policy is to set management objectives and to provide management guidance for natural (in-river) and hatchery production, and recreational and commercial harvest of fall Chinook, coho, and chum salmon populations in Willapa Bay.

Authority Definition and Intent

This Policy is established by the Washington State Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) and is applicable to the management by the Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) of fall Chinook, coho, and chum salmon (salmon) in Willapa Bay and its freshwater tributaries as the Commission's interpretation of the Commission and Department mandate described in RCW 77.04.112.

The intent of this Policy is to provide guidance for the management of natural- and hatchery- origin production, and recreational and commercial harvest of fall Chinook, coho, and chum salmon in Willapa Bay. Management of natural- and hatchery-origin production and harvest will be transparent and consistent with normal agency operations and existing agency and Commission policies (e.g., C-3624: Anadromous Salmon and Steelhead Hatchery Policy).

Policy Objectives

These policy objectives are a statement of the Commission's values and vision for the future conditions of Willapa Bay environment, the fall Chinook, coho, and chum salmon populations in Willapa Bay, and the recreational and commercial fishing opportunities in the marine and freshwaters of Willapa Bay.

1. Productive natural-spawning populations that are locally adapted, diverse genetically to maintain adaptability, and occur in densities appropriate for the local environment.
2. Sustainable fishing levels for both recreational and commercial fisheries that maximize harvest opportunities.
3. Hatchery production is set at levels needed for optimized harvest and suitable for maintenance of natural-origin populations.
4. Management actions associated with harvest, hatchery production, and natural- origin escapement adhere to ecosystem-based management principles that consider the risks and benefits to species and habitats within the Willapa Bay system, including vulnerabilities to a changing climate.

Adaptive Management

Each year appropriate data (performance measures; see below) on commercial and recreational harvest, hatchery production, hatchery surplus, and natural- and hatchery- origin escapement into the rivers of Willapa Bay will be collected and evaluated. These data and subsequent analyses must be used to determine if the policy objectives are being achieved. If objectives are not being optimally achieved, harvest and hatchery production levels should be altered, and escapement goals re-evaluated until objectives are optimally achieved. Monitoring, data collection, and data analyses are conducted as part of normal agency operations, and the adaptive management process allows for changes in commercial

and recreational harvest, hatchery production, and natural-origin escapement goals without approval from the Commission.

Guidance

1. Recreational and commercial harvest opportunities in Willapa Bay depend on the availability of hatchery-origin (primarily) and natural-origin adult fish returning to Willapa Bay. Increasing hatchery production from Willapa Bay facilities may increase harvest opportunities but may also decrease production from the natural environment when there is not a robust method to manage the number of hatchery- origin fish that stray to the natural environment. The Department must manage hatchery production and harvest so that the policy objectives are optimally achieved.
2. The Department shall develop performance measures (e.g., proportion of natural spawners that are of hatchery-origin – pHOS) that estimate the consequence of a specific management action (e.g., number of smolts released from a hatchery) with respect to one or more of the policy objectives. This will allow for appropriate monitoring of management actions and facilitate adaptive management, if necessary.
3. The Department shall investigate the feasibility and cost for the design, installation, operation, and maintenance of weirs in the Willapa and Naselle rivers capable of controlling the number of hatchery-origin fish that stray to the natural environment.
4. The Department shall work with partners (including Regional Fishery Enhancement Groups, nonprofit organizations, the public, and Lead Entities) to protect and restore habitat productivity.
5. The Department shall strive to mark all juvenile hatchery-origin Chinook and coho salmon by adipose fin removal and seek funding to improve monitoring and evaluation of chum salmon by internal bone marking or other methods.
6. Hatchery production:
 - a. There can be significant genetic and ecological risks to natural-origin salmon populations that accompany the operation of a salmon hatchery program. There can also be many benefits from well-managed hatchery programs that propagate salmon including the support of sustainable fisheries.
 - b. A Hatchery Management Plan (HMP) shall be developed for each facility in Willapa Bay (Forks Creek, Naselle, and Nemah hatcheries) under the authority of Commissioner Policy C-3624 and each hatchery program shall operate in accordance with the provisions of its HMP.
 - c. Each HMP shall be based on the best available science on the risks of hatchery production on natural-origin salmon and contain the essential elements of operational planning that will control aspects such as broodstock collection, mating protocols, and juvenile rearing and release strategies.
 - d. HMP provisions are to reflect a balance between minimizing genetic and ecological risks to coincident natural-origin populations and providing for the ecological and societal benefits of hatchery propagated salmon.
7. Harvest management:
 - a. State commercial and recreational fisheries will focus on the harvest of abundant hatchery fish. Mark-selective fisheries are a tool that permit the harvest of abundant hatchery fish while reducing impacts on wild stocks needing protection. As a general policy, the Department shall implement mark-selective salmon fisheries, unless the wild populations substantially affected by the fishery are meeting spawner (e.g., escapement goals) and broodstock management objectives. In addition, the Department may

consider avoidance, alternative gears, or other selective fishing concepts along with other management approaches provided they are as or more effective than a mark-selective fishery in achieving spawner and broodstock management objectives. State commercial fisheries directed at species which are forecasted to be below escapement objectives will utilize gear types that provide the most conservation benefit (i.e., tangle nets).

- b. The Department shall work through the Pacific Salmon Commission to promote the conservation of Willapa Bay salmon and, in a manner consistent with the provisions of the Pacific Salmon Treaty, pursue the implementation of fishery management actions necessary to achieve policy objectives.
- c. Within the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Council) process, the Department shall support management measures that promote the attainment of Willapa Bay policy objectives consistent with the Council's Salmon Fishery Management Plan.
- d. The Department shall develop and implement enhanced enforcement strategies to improve compliance with fishing regulations and ensure orderly fisheries when necessary.
- e. North River will be managed as a Wild Salmon Management Zone with no hatchery releases of any species of salmon.
- f. The Department shall conduct Management Strategy Evaluations for stocks to evaluate alternative harvest control rules including, but not limited to, Smsy escapement goals. Until such actions are implemented, the Department shall use the following natural-origin spawner escapement goals as harvest control measures.
 - i. Chinook: 4,353
 - ii. Coho: 13,600
 - iii. Chum: 35,400
- g. Fishery Management:
 - i. Fall Chinook: Fall chinook fisheries shall be managed to achieve a general priority for recreational fisheries, but to provide for meaningful fishing opportunity for both recreational and commercial fisheries. This general priority shall be accomplished with a management intent to provide the first opportunity for directed fall Chinook fishing to the mixed stock recreational fishery in the northern portion of Willapa Bay (Marine Areas 2T and 2U) as well as an opportunity for recreational fisheries in Willapa Bay tributaries. The Willapa Bay mixed-stock recreational fishery will be managed to the extent that it does not preclude Willapa Bay commercial fishing opportunity or tributary recreational fishing opportunity. Commercial fall Chinook salmon targeted fisheries shall be managed in Willapa Bay areas to achieve natural-origin spawning escapement goals for the Willapa and Naselle rivers and a meaningful recreational opportunity for tributary fall Chinook fishing. Tributary recreational fisheries shall be managed to achieve river-specific natural-origin spawning escapement goals and provide meaningful opportunity prior to spawning area closures in a manner consistent with law enforcement concerns and low water situations.

If the number of natural-origin spawners for either the Willapa or Naselle river natural-origin fall Chinook salmon is less than the spawner escapement goal in 3 out of 5 years running, and the preseason forecast is less than 120% of tributary level escapement objectives, the impact rate on

either Willapa and/or Naselle river natural-origin fall Chinook salmon in Willapa Bay fisheries shall not exceed 20%.

Commercial fisheries will be scheduled to avoid conflict with recreational fisheries that primarily occur in the northern portion of Willapa Bay during August and the first half of September.

- ii. Coho: Coho salmon fisheries shall be managed to achieve a general priority for commercial fisheries, but to provide for meaningful fishing opportunity for both recreational and commercial fisheries when run sizes are sufficient to support fisheries. The Willapa Bay commercial fishery will be managed to the extent that it does not preclude Willapa Bay mixed-stock recreational fishing opportunity or tributary recreational fishing opportunity. Commercial coho target fisheries shall be managed in Willapa Bay areas to achieve the aggregate natural-origin spawning escapement goals and recreational opportunity for tributary recreational coho fishing. Tributary recreational fisheries for coho salmon shall be managed to achieve natural-origin spawning escapement goals and provide meaningful opportunity prior to spawning area closures and in a manner consistent with law enforcement concerns and low water situations.

When the pre-season forecast of natural-origin adult Coho is less than the aggregate spawner escapement goal, or the number of natural- origin spawners is less than the spawner escapement goal in 3 out of the last 5 years, fisheries in the Willapa Bay Basin will be scheduled to result in an impact of no more than 10% of the adult return.

- iii. Chum: Chum salmon fisheries shall be managed to achieve a general priority for commercial fisheries, but to provide for meaningful fishing opportunity for both recreational and commercial fisheries when run sizes are sufficient to support fisheries. Commercial and recreational fisheries directed at chum salmon shall be managed to achieve the aggregate spawning escapement goals. The commercial fishery priority shall be accomplished by providing the first opportunity for chum directed fishing to the mixed stock commercial fishery in Willapa Bay, with sufficient escapement to provide a secondary opportunity for recreational fisheries in Willapa Bay tributaries.

When the pre-season forecast of natural-origin adult Chum is less than the aggregate spawner escapement goal, or the number of natural- origin spawners is less than the spawner escapement goal in 3 out of the last 5 years, fisheries in the Willapa Bay Basin will be scheduled to result in an impact of no more than 10% of the adult return.

- h. Planning for Willapa Bay species-specific fisheries shall take into account incidental impacts in fisheries targeting the other species named in this policy and steelhead. The Director shall use their discretion in prioritizing the number of incidental impacts allocated to each species-specific targeted fisheries in Willapa Bay, with a goal of achieving policy objectives.

Delegation of Authority

The Commission delegates the authority to the Director, through the North of Falcon stakeholder consultation process, to set seasons for recreational and commercial fisheries in the Willapa Bay Basin, and to adopt permanent and emergency regulations to implement these fisheries.

This guidance establishes a number of important conservation and allocation principles for the Director and agency staff to apply when managing the fishery resources of Willapa Bay. The Commission fully expects that the Director and agency staff will continue to communicate with the public, and the Commission, to consider new information, evaluate alternate means for carrying out policy objectives, and consider instances in which it may make sense to deviate from the presumptive path forward. That is the nature of both adaptive management, and policy implementation, when faced with a dynamic natural environment.

DRAFT

WDFW response to draft Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy public comments

Marlene Wagner, Kelly Cunningham, Chad Herring, Kenneth Warheit
August 17, 2023

WDFW held a formal public comment period for the final draft Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy from July 5 through August 7, 2023. We received six comments through our Willapa Bay Salmon Management Review webpage online comment portal. We received four emails to our Willapa Bay distribution list and/or work emails, one of which represented both Columbia River Crab Fisherman's Association (CRCFA) and Coalition of Coastal Fisheries (CCF). We also received a letter sent to Commissioners from the executive director of the Washington chapter of Coastal Conservation Association (CCA). CCA ran an effort where the public could make use of a pre-drafted letter when sending their comments to the Commission. This resulted in 277 emails sent to Commissioners. Input from the public was presented to and summarized for the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) at the August 10-12, 2023, meeting held at the Natural Resources Building in Olympia, Washington.

General statement about the draft policy

The intent of the draft policy is to provide regional managers guidance and management objectives for managing mixed-stock commercial and recreational salmon fisheries in the marine and freshwater areas of Willapa Bay. Willapa Bay salmon fisheries, along with all Washington State salmon fisheries, are subject to the North of Falcon salmon stakeholder process under the Commission's North of Falcon Policy C-3608. The policy also directs the Department to develop Hatchery Management Plans (HMPs) in accordance with the Commissioner's Anadromous Salmon and Steelhead Policy C-3624. The purpose statement in the draft policy recognizes that natural- and hatchery-origin fish are both significant when managing salmon populations with hatchery programs such as those in Willapa Bay.

Conservation is lacking in the draft policy compared to the 2015 policy

Several commenters stated that the policy has deviated from conservation relative to the 2015 policy. One set of comments¹ was concerned with the removal of reference to conservation or recovery of natural-origin (wild) salmon in the purpose statement.

Department staff, in our initial policy revision language, maintained nearly the same purpose statement as was written in the 2015 policy². Commissioners on the Fish Committee were concerned that the language did not emphasize the need to manage hatchery fish in concert with natural-origin fish. In addition, there occurred much discussion on what may be more useful for a "purpose statement" versus an "objectives" section. In Willapa Bay's integrated hatchery systems, it is imperative to manage hatchery fish alongside natural-origin populations, as they indisputably affect each other. Therefore, the Purpose statement was modified to: *The purpose of this Policy is to set management objectives and to provide management guidance for natural (in-river) and hatchery production, and recreational and commercial harvest of fall Chinook, coho, and chum salmon populations in Willapa Bay.* The Objectives section does address, we feel more explicitly than the 2015 policy, conservation values that include: 1. *Productive natural-spawning populations that are locally adapted, diverse genetically to maintain adaptability, and occur in densities appropriate for the local environment.* 2. *Sustainable fishing levels for both recreational and commercial fisheries that maximize harvest opportunities.* 3. *Hatchery production is set at levels needed for optimized harvest and suitable for maintenance of natural-origin populations.*

¹ Comments by Coastal Conservation Association

² We omitted the word "steelhead"

4. Management actions associated with harvest, hatchery production, and natural- origin escapement adhere to ecosystem-based management principles that consider the risks and benefits to species and habitats within the Willapa Bay system, including vulnerabilities to a changing climate.

One letter³ stated, among conservation concerns, that the draft policy includes “aggregate (hatchery and wild) escapement goals for Chinook, Coho, and Chum. Aggregated escapement goals are insufficient to ensure the conservation and recovery of wild salmon populations.” There are no aggregate hatchery and wild escapement goals for any species of salmon in Willapa Bay. Willapa Bay Chinook salmon are managed to river-specific natural-origin escapement goals. Coho and Chum salmon are managed to aggregate bay-wide natural-origin escapement goals.

Throughout the last two and a half years of policy revision deliberation with FWC Fish Committee, several meetings focused on the appropriateness of existing harvest control plans, or escapement goals, in Willapa Bay, with particular attention to Chinook escapement goals. The current bay-wide Chinook salmon escapement goal of 4,353, is managed at the tributary level, and is a habitat-based objective created in 1986⁴. Habitat has been altered due to logging, development, and restoration in the last 37 years, and the need for an updated harvest control plan is warranted. The draft policy mandates in Guidance 7(f): *The Department shall conduct Management Strategy Evaluations for stocks to evaluate alternative harvest control rules including, but not limited to, Smsy escapement goals. Until such actions are implemented, the Department shall use the following natural origin spawner escapement goals as harvest control measures. i. Chinook: 4,353 ii. Coho: 13,600 iii. Chum: 35,400.*

Management Strategy Evaluations are used to assess the effectiveness of current and alternative harvest control rules in perpetuating salmonid populations while supporting sustainable fishing opportunities. By using Integrated Population Models and forward projections, managers and the public will be better informed and able to make both scientific- and value-based decisions on the outcomes of potential harvest control rules.

The same letter⁵ states that payback provisions should be used when the department fails to meet escapement goals. The primary reason a payback provision was written into the 2015 policy for Chinook salmon was due to the data-poor state of Willapa Bay salmon fisheries at the time. Coinciding with 2015 policy implementation, additional funding was secured to increase monitoring efforts of recreational and commercial fisheries in marine areas as well as to expand spawning ground survey coverage. These programs have led to improved and more timely data which has enabled adaptive management of fisheries in-season. Furthermore, these additional data have led to improvements in forecasting and fishery planning tools, resulting in the creation of new in-season update models. The letter also incorrectly states that a 14% impact rate was never instated in salmon fishery season setting. A 14% impact rate was employed in 2020 and was altered at the guidance of the Fish Committee to 20% in 2021 largely due to the 10-year renegotiation of the Pacific Salmon Treaty that occurred in 2019, reducing coastal Washington-origin stocks in northern fisheries (See also: Pacific Salmon Treaty and the reduction of harvest in ocean fisheries, below).

^{3,5} Comments by Coastal Conservation Association

⁴ [Brix memo, 1986](#)

Hatchery production numbers should be increased

Several commenters from the recreational sector want to see an increase hatchery production numbers. There were also commenters who were happy to see that production at Willapa Bay hatcheries would undergo the HMP process.

In the 2015 Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy, Chinook salmon production numbers were prescribed for each of the three facilities in Willapa Bay. In 2021, the Commission approved the Anadromous Salmon and Steelhead Policy C-3624, which mandates the development of an HMP for each hatchery facility, and Willapa Bay hatcheries must go through this process. The management framework for each HMP shall be based upon best available science and reflect a balance between minimizing genetic and ecological risk to coincident natural-origin populations and provide for ecological and societal benefits of hatchery propagated salmon. This will be achieved using a structured decision-making process that makes use of a science-based risk management framework to quantitatively address risks and benefits of hatchery production and incorporates uncertainty in the estimates of the risks and benefits. Furthermore, production is to be adaptively managed through monitoring and evaluation.

The prescribed Chinook salmon production in the 2015 policy at the Forks Creek Hatchery facility was reduced from previous years (except in 2020 when the Fish Committee mandated a 2 million production increase to “preserve options”) and is of concern to recreational anglers as it is thought to have reduced marine sport harvest opportunity that primarily occurs in the northern section of Willapa Bay. The Department acknowledges this is possible, but more recent data collected using coded-wire tags show that, while variable from year to year, recreational marine catch is comprised of approximately 40% fish from Forks Creek Hatchery, 40% out-of-basin stocks, and 20% from Naselle and Nemah Hatcheries. Out-of-basin stocks are mainly from the lower Columbia River that have “dipped-in” to Willapa Bay and therefore local marine fisheries are highly dependent on the returns of those stocks.

Commercial fisheries management

Several commenters stated that commercial Chinook harvest should be mark-selective, that the policy should maintain time and area restrictions for commercial fishing, and that there is too much commercial harvest. There was a general sentiment from the recreational angler community that the commercial fisheries are taking too many Chinook salmon at the cost of recreational allocation.

Both commercial and recreational Chinook salmon harvest in Willapa Bay has been mark-selective since 2010.

Department staff and Commissioners agree that the language provided in the draft policy should allow for flexibility and adaptive management. We do provide specific language, however, that states, in Guidance section 7(g): *Fall Chinook fisheries shall be managed to achieve a general priority for recreational fisheries, but to provide for meaningful fishing opportunity for both recreational and commercial fisheries. This general priority shall be accomplished with a management intent to provide the first opportunity for directed fall Chinook fishing to the mixed stock recreational fishery in the northern portion of Willapa Bay (Marine Areas 2T and 2U) as well as an opportunity for recreational fisheries in Willapa Bay tributaries. And furthermore that: Commercial fisheries will be scheduled to avoid conflict with recreational fisheries that primarily occur in the northern portion of Willapa Bay during August and the first half of September.*

Water flow issues are not addressed

A commenter expressed concern about not seeing water flow in the rivers in the draft policy.

Water flow issues across the range of Pacific Salmon are of increasing concern due to historic high temperatures and low rainfall. This is especially pronounced in rivers that drain into Willapa Bay as they are not glacier-fed but are dependent on rainfall. Last year, in 2022, historic low flows resulted in emergency closures statewide to conserve fall Chinook salmon populations. Water flow is just one of a myriad of dynamic issues facing salmon in a rapidly changing climate. While it is difficult to forecast fall weather patterns in the spring, when the North of Falcon salmon season setting process occurs, agency staff closely monitor water flows during the fall fishing season. Policy Objective number four mandates the Department accordingly: *Management actions associated with harvest, hatchery production, and natural- origin escapement adhere to ecosystem-based management principles that consider the risks and benefits to species and habitats within the Willapa Bay system, including vulnerabilities to a changing climate.* We also specifically state in the policy draft for each species that tributary fishing will be managed to: *provide meaningful opportunity prior to spawning area closures in a manner consistent with law enforcement concerns and low water situations.*

Chinook predation by pinnipeds

One commenter stated that most Chinook salmon they have caught in the Nemah and Naselle Rivers have seal and sea lion bite marks and asks what has been done to account for predation in the estuary.

Pinniped populations are beyond the scope of a Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy. Marine mammals are managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

Policy is harvest-centric

Several commenters expressed concern that the draft policy is harvest-centric

Both the 2015 policy and the draft Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy are inherently policies meant to provide regional managers with FWC guidance in managing Willapa Bay salmon harvest. The draft Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy purpose is to: *set management objectives and to provide management guidance for natural (in-river) and hatchery production, and recreational and commercial harvest of fall Chinook, coho, and chum salmon populations in Willapa Bay.*

Enforcement is lacking in Willapa Bay

Several commenters suggested that enforcement is lacking, particularly for commercial fisheries.

The fall salmon fishery coincides in timing with a broad set of enforcement responsibilities, which does divide WDFW law enforcement attention. There are two sergeants with three officers each patrolling the southwest Washington Coast. Their jurisdiction spans Grays Harbor, Pacific, and Wahkiakum Counties as well as offshore waters. They work under the direction of WDFW's Region 6 Fish and Wildlife Enforcement Captain.

The 2015 policy resulted in increased monitoring of the commercial fishery sector, with WDFW staff observers conducting both onboard and fish buyer monitoring. This has led to significant reduction in commercial fishing violations.

Policy did not have meaningful public comment

Several commenters expressed the feeling that there was not enough public comment relative to the creation of the 2015 policy. One comment⁶ expressed strong objection to the timing of the comment period due to much of the commercial fleet fishing out of state.

Public involvement in the Willapa Bay Salmon Management Policy review was included throughout the Comprehensive Review process with Department staff seeking public input through twelve public or advisory group meetings as well as through the Willapa Bay Policy Review webpage. The meetings began in January of 2018 and concluded with a public meeting held via webinar on August 18, 2020. Since the Comprehensive review process was completed in December of 2020, the Commission has heard public comment seven times during their scheduled meetings on Willapa Bay policy revisions. Public comment was opened for the final Policy Draft from July 5 to August 7, 2023. A public comment portal on Willapa Bay Policy Review webpage has been online and available since the Comprehensive Review was initiated in 2018.

We considered the Alaska salmon season and took steps to ensure the commercial fleet was aware of the timing. We did receive public comment from the sector, including from the president of the Willapa Bay Gillnetters Association.

Recreational priority

Several commenters stated that Willapa Bay should be a recreational fishery or that Chinook salmon fishing should have recreational priority.

WDFW Fish Program is mandated to provide opportunity for both commercial and recreational fisheries. The draft policy includes a general Chinook priority for the recreational fisheries sector. This is to be accomplished by providing the first opportunity for directed fall Chinook fishing to the mixed stock recreational fishery in the northern portion of Willapa Bay (Marine Areas 2T and 2U) as well as an opportunity for recreational fisheries in Willapa Bay tributaries. Indeed, since 2015 policy inception, the recreational Chinook fishing sector has caught more Chinook salmon than the commercial sector, including years when the commercial fleet was allowed to fish in the south part of the bay (Figure 1).

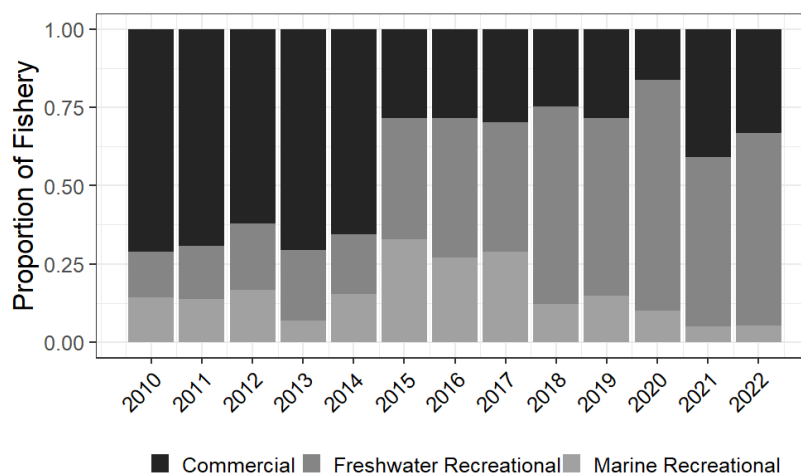


Figure 1. Proportion of Chinook salmon caught by commercial and recreational sectors from 2010 to 2022 in Willapa Bay.

⁶ Comment by Columbia River Crab Fisherman’s Association/Coalition of Coastal Fisheries president

Commission should have more oversight

Several commenters are concerned that the Commission has not provided enough authority in the draft policy and/or that the Commission should more closely follow Willapa Bay fisheries.

The draft policy specifically states, in the Delegation of Authority section: *The Commission delegates the authority to the Director, through the North of Falcon stakeholder consultation process, to set seasons for recreational and commercial fisheries in the Willapa Bay Basin, and to adopt permanent and emergency regulations to implement these fisheries. This guidance establishes a number of important conservation and allocation principles for the Director and agency staff to apply when managing the fishery resources of Willapa Bay. The Commission fully expects that the Director and agency staff will continue to communicate with the public, and the Commission, to consider new information, evaluate alternate means for carrying out policy objectives, and consider instances in which it may make sense to deviate from the presumptive path forward. That is the nature of both adaptive management, and policy implementation, when faced with a dynamic natural environment.*

License reduction

Some commenters expressed concern that due to Columbia River license reductions, there will be more pressure on Willapa Bay stocks or that gillnetting should be reduced as a result of buybacks.

The Columbia River License Reduction Program was intended to be a Columbia River initiative to diversify the types of fishing gear used in the lower Columbia River commercial fishery to move towards gears with greater mark-selective capabilities. Given the structure of Columbia River salmon gillnet licenses, fishing privileges are linked for Willapa Bay and Grays Harbor. It is not yet clear how this will impact commercial fishing in Willapa Bay, but we are increasing our marine monitoring this year, and we are not anticipating a major change in commercial effort in the Willapa Bay basin. We know that several active commercial fishers hold multiple licenses and sold active licenses and activated inactive licenses to maximize earnings and continue fishing. No license holder who fishes Willapa Bay makes their living solely on that fishery, rather, they also fish in other areas and states, and for species other than salmon. If anything, this will provide us with more resolute data moving forward, as there will be less ambiguity in the number of licenses participating in any commercial opening with the majority of inactive (that could always be reactivated) licenses removed from our roster.

Pacific Salmon Treaty and the reduction of harvest in ocean fisheries

Several commenters stated that there has not been adequate progress in lowering exploitation rates in northern and Washington coast ocean fisheries.

The Pacific Salmon Treaty is renegotiated every 10 years and was last completed in 2019, which resulted in harvest reductions on Chinook salmon in Alaska and Canada in both aggregate abundance-based management regimes (AABM: see chapter 3 table 1, and chapter 3 Appendix C) and individual stock-based management regimes (ISBM: see chapter 3 attachment I)⁷.

Willapa Bay fall Chinook salmon are far-north ocean migrators and make only minor contributions to ocean fisheries off the Washington coast, where Columbia River stocks are the driver. Ocean fishery levels are already limited each year by ESA-listed Columbia River and Puget Sound stocks. Northern fisheries have far larger catches on Willapa Bay Chinook salmon and Southern United States representatives to the Pacific Salmon Commission have negotiated significant reductions to northern fisheries in each of the last three versions of PST Chinook agreements.

⁷ Pacific Salmon Treaty [link](#)

The United States has spent hundreds of millions of dollars that were tied to getting reductions in northern fisheries affecting Southern United States stocks. This money goes towards funding license buybacks in both countries to reduce the size of fleets, funding endowment funds to improve management, salmon recovery efforts, etc. Southern United States officials will continue to seek reductions to northern impacts on our stocks in future negotiations.