

# The Dipnetter

News of the River from the  
Columbia River Inter-Tribal  
Fish Commission



December 2014

## NEW RESEARCH SHOWS SALMON LOSSES, SEA LION INCREASES

JEREMY FIVECROWS, CRITFC PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Recent research from NOAA Fisheries is trying to find out just how many adult salmon are being lost between the mouth of the Columbia River and Bonneville Dam. The number they came up with is quite alarming.

The fish loss research, which began in 2010, shows a steady increase in fish deaths in that stretch. Adjusted for harvest and other salmon impacts, the 2014 average spring chinook salmon survival was just 55 percent, down from 69 percent in 2013 and 82 percent in 2012. If the 2014 estimate is representative of the overall run, this means approximately 45 percent of the 2014 spring chinook run died somewhere between Astoria and Bonneville Dam.

Right now, the research can't tell how much of this fish loss is due to sea lions and seals. The project lead researcher Dr. Michelle Wargo-Rub of the Seattle-based Northwest Fisheries Science Center reported, though, that fish mortality and the number of sea lions in the estuary have increased dramatically in recent years. This coincides with reports from tribal fishers, who have been seeing evidence of sea lion and seal predation on damaged fish in their nets.

CRITFC and other agencies are trying to fill in this gap in the research. They hope to determine just how much of the loss being seen is due to sea lions and seals. One current CRITFC research project is counting sea lions and seals along the entire lower river, not just at Bonneville Dam.

The fish loss research focuses on spring chinook because that is the time of year when the sea lion population is largest in the river. The sea lions follow the spring chinook run coming up the river between March and May. Most of the sea lions then go to breeding grounds off southern California in the summer.

About 68 percent of the fish the researchers tagged and sampled near Astoria were destined for the river and tributaries above Bonneville based on genetic testing.

Survival varies over the course of the run, Dr. Wargo-Rub said. It appears that a higher percentage of fish in the early part of the run die before reaching Bonneville Dam



Sea lions crowd a walkway at a mooring basin in Astoria. Photo courtesy Northwest Power and Conservation Council.

than fish migrating later in the spring. Early returning fish also take longer to reach the dam, which exposes them to sea lions and seals for a longer time, she said.

CRITFC has been working with the States of Oregon and Washington, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to haze California and Steller sea lions below Bonneville dam to hopefully change their behavior. The CRITFC hazing crew uses cracker shells, seal bombs, and boat chases to attempt to change the sea lions' feeding location and cut down on the number of salmon they eat. This keeps them away from the fish ladders but doesn't keep the sea lions and seals from coming up the river in the first place.

"The tribes and state and federal agencies are pouring enormous resources and millions of dollars into salmon restoration. We can't afford having all our hard-earned gains to be eaten by this growing sea lion predation problem," said CRITFC Chairman Carlos Smith. "Our hazing effort is really a stopgap measure until this underlying problem is dealt with."

The tribes continue to advocate for federal agencies to address the growing problem. The issue is made particularly thorny as it pits two major conservation laws (Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act) and the tribal treaties against each other. 🐟

## Protecting the Waters of the Columbia Basin

Even before we eat the salmon at the feasts, we drink choosh. Tribal people have known since time immemorial that water is what all life depends on. Where tribal people could once drink pure water straight from the rivers in the region, today we don't even dare. It is unacceptable that our most precious medicine has been turned into something that can harm us and the fish, animals, and plants that all depend on it.

The tribes have been advocates of improving water quality for decades, particularly since our diets rich in fish expose us to higher amounts of toxic substances found in the water.

On November 14, CRITFC hosted a Columbia Basin 15 Tribes meeting with Dennis McLerran, EPA Region 10 Administrator. Over 40 Columbia Basin tribal leaders and tribal staff attended to discuss water quality issues of common concern. The meeting gave them the opportunity to express tribal views on the water quality standard processes in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, EPA rulemaking, the Columbia River Restoration Act, and other topics. Prior to this meeting the tribes met with Rob Duff, Washington Governor's Office Policy Advisor, to review the Washington Governor's Toxics Reduction Initiative.

As a result of these meetings, the tribes agreed that future strategies are needed to move forward including the need for improved state water quality standards and documenting our concerns directly with the EPA. It was decided that the 15 tribes should meet annually on water quality issues due to the many continuing pressing concerns.

By speaking together with one voice, the Columbia Basin tribes are forcefully reminding the US government that water should be protected, pure, and respected, not just because it's a treaty protected obligation, but because all life in the region is counting on it.



Paul Lumley  
YAKAMA



Tribal and federal leaders, staff, and presenters from the water quality meeting.

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## FALL FISHERY UPDATE

STUART ELLIS, CRITFC HARVEST BIOLOGIST

The fall fishing season has mostly wound down. The Zone 6 platforms can still sell any salmon or steelhead they catch through the end of the year, but there isn't much fishing effort or catch. The tribes did authorize a sturgeon setline fishery in The Dalles pool to try to get some more of the fish remaining on the commercial harvest guideline. A few sturgeon are being picked up.

This year's fall season fisheries have set records for modern times. This year's total fall chinook run was a bit less than the record high predicted, but was still a close second to last year's record return. Steelhead returns did a bit better than predicted. The upriver coho return at Bonneville was the second highest since dam construction. At The Dalles Dam and further upriver, coho counts set record highs. The tribes had nine weeks of commercial gillnet fishing and caught over 260,000 adult fall chinook. There were 41½ days of commercial gillnet fishing, which is the most open days since at least back in the 1980's. During the peak week, the tribal fishery caught just over 80,000 fall chinook, which is more than some fall seasons caught in their entirety. We have not found any records of harvesting more fish than this in one week, so this may be a new record high weekly catch. Even with all this fishing, fall chinook counts at Lower Granite set new records for adult fall chinook and adult coho. This is further evidence that tribal efforts to restore and rebuild upriver runs has benefited both the fish as well as fisheries and tribal economies.

Fishers may be turning their thoughts to next year. The pre-season forecasts won't be done until December for spring and summer chinook and sockeye and the other stocks won't be forecasted until as late as early February. Fish runs naturally cycle up and down, so we may not see runs as large as this year in 2015, but most stocks may have pretty good returns next year and there is no reason we shouldn't see good fishing opportunity. Remember that our forecasts are just predictions and the fisheries get managed based on the actual returns. 🐟

## WINTER BOAT MAINTENANCE

LARRY BLAIS, BOAT ENGINE EXPERT

With end-of-season weatherization, you can make sure your boat is ready to go for the spring season next year.

### Boat Engine

Check the lower unit to see that no water is in the unit. Drain it. Put fresh lower unit gear oil (refer to the manufacturer's recommendations). Run the engine on a garden hose. Run all the fuel out of the carburetor to empty and dry the engine. Do this whether you have a two-cycle or four-cycle stroke, outboard engine.

Any gas left inside creates a varnish that can be a problem when trying to start the engine. Fuel—gas with ethanol—can't be left sitting in the engine.

### Life Jackets

Remember to store your life jackets in a dry location over winter. Oftentimes, life jackets are left in boats over the winter and it isn't until a fisher is launching the boat the following spring that it is discovered that the life jackets are covered in mold or mildew. When this happens, it is all too easy to say, "I'll go without this one time, because I don't want to drive into town to buy another one." Life is too precious to make this kind of mistake. By making sure you're ready for anything, you can increase your safety and the safety of your boat crew.

Excerpt from the CRITFC Salmon Marketing Program's "Tribal Fishers Handbook." If you would like a copy of this booklet, contact Les Brown at (503) 799-8640. 🐟

*A moldy life jacket that had been left in a boat over winter.*



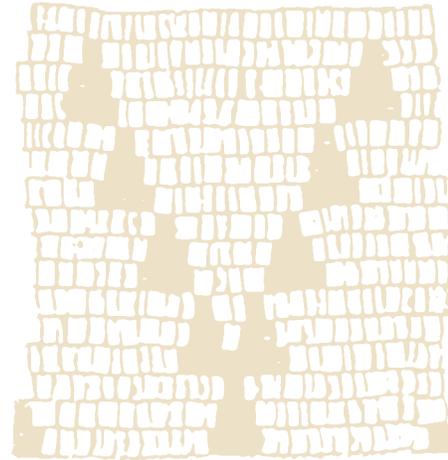


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Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission  
700 NE Multnomah St, Suite 1200  
Portland, OR 97232  
www.critfc.org · (503) 238-0667



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## THE LONG ROAD TO SALMON RECOVERY

This year's total counts of chinook, sockeye, steelhead and coho at Bonneville Dam set a new record since the dam was built in 1938. New record returns also occurred in the Snake River Basin since Lower Granite Dam was built (fall chinook, coho and sockeye) with significant returns elsewhere in the Columbia River Basin. There is no doubt that the total count of nearly **2.4 million** adult salmon and steelhead at Bonneville Dam was very substantial. However, this level of return still pales in comparison to the kinds of returns when the tribes signed the treaties in 1855, with annual returns to the Columbia River Basin estimated to be as high as 34 million salmon. Let's celebrate this year's milestone, but remember that the work of salmon recovery continues. 🐟

