

Association of Northwest Steelheaders

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Established 1960

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SAFE: Positive Signs Point to a Future Victory

By Russell Bassett and Liz Hamilton

Despite great support from the sportfishing community, SAFE for Salmon did not make out of committee during the 2011 Oregon legislative session. While our measure to move gillnets off the mainstem Columbia River ultimately failed, there were several positive signs when compared to the 2009 legislative session that provide hope for a successful resolution to this issue in the near future.

For starters, the Oregon Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources voted April 21 to pass SAFE out of committee. The vote was historic, as it was the first time in nearly 40 years that the Oregon Legislature made meaningful progress toward reducing gillnetting on the Columbia.

Also, this year, the sportfishing community spoke together with one voice in favor of SAFE, compared to 2009 when a key sportfishing organization did not support the measure. In 2009, there was also opposition from a few environmental groups, and that did not happen this year.

Another positive sign was that almost two dozen legislators, both Democrats and Republicans, signed-on as sponsors of the bill. Steelheaders lobbyist Bob Oleson said that in all his year's working at the capitol he has "not see any natural resource bill that comes close to having such an impressive list of sponsors. Most of these folks are veteran leaders in their respective parties and houses, and the chief sponsors are four of the most respected people serving in the legislature."

We are confident that we had enough bi-partisan support to pass the measure on the floor of both houses, but Republican members of the House Rules and Senate Environment committees would not vote in support because of concerns they had with a potential loss of jobs in the commercial sector. This is especially hard to understand because anglers and hunters are traditional members of the Republican base and the goal of SAFE was to assure jobs both recreational and commercial.

SAFE for Salmon, which this session was Bill 736 in the Senate and Bill 3657-3 in the House, would have moved the non-tribal commercial gillnet fleet in the Lower Columbia River below Bonneville Dam into off-channel Select Area Fisheries Enhancement (SAFE) areas. SAFE for Salmon would change fish management of the Columbia River in order to reduce bycatch mortality on wild fish, increase sportfishing catch, and benefit Oregon's economy by providing more consistent sportfishing seasons and more jobs. Over the last two years, SAFE areas have provided more than 100,000 fish to the commercial fishery and general public.

SAFE areas are a proven success. Currently, Oregon has three SAFE areas in use: Youngs Bay, Tongue Point/South Channel, and Blind Slough/Knappa Slough. In the last two years, commercial gillnet landings in the SAFE zones has grown to be larger than the sport harvest in the entire lower Columbia river. The outlook is even brighter for future SAFE zone harvests. In recent years, the states have increased releases of smolts into SAFE areas by nearly 40 percent. This smolt releases in the SAFE areas provide even more fish to our region's fish markets and reduces by-catch of non target and ESA-listed species in the commercial fishery. There was some concern from the sportfishing community that smolts released in the SAFE areas would be transferred from tributaries, reducing the tributary sportfishing catch; however, ODFW assured SAFE supporters that it had enough surpluses smolts to feed the SAFE areas without reducing in-stream plants.

Steelheaders has been working to reduce or remove gillnetting on the Columbia since the organization's beginnings 50 years ago, and has made several incredible achievements along the way, including eliminating the commercial steelhead fishery, banning high sea drift nets, and making the Columbia commercial salmon fishery selective. Steelheaders worked closely with ally groups to pass SAFE this session, including the Northwest Sportfishing Industry Association, Trout Unlimited,

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Northwest Guides and Anglers Association, Coastal Conservation Association, Oregon Conservation Network, and Oregon Wild.

In every case, these efforts have resulted in restored runs and seasons of benefit to the sportfishing community. The Northwest Steelheaders have been the tip of the spear and voice for salmon, steelhead and trout anglers in nearly every major fisheries issue in the region.

"Anglers often have as many ideas on how fish should be managed as they do gear types, but on this issue, we are united." said Russell Bassett, Northwest Steelheaders executive director. "It's was refreshing to see the sportfishing and conservation communities work together and get some positive movement on this issue, but the gill net lobby is very powerful, and they proved to be very uncompromising.

"Many Steelheaders joined ANWS because of this issue, and I want them to know that we worked our butts off to get SAFE passed during the 2011 legislative session," Bassett continued. "It didn't happen, but we will not give up, and the positive signs we saw this year are paving the way for a successful vote in the future."

In politics you never lose unless you quit.

In order to get positive movement on SAFE, Steelheaders and our allies had to compromise on the measure so that the mainstem gillnet ban would be from Jan. 1 to July 31, rather than year round. Despite this reduction, the rhetoric coming from the gillnetters did not change, and they were unwilling to compromise throughout the session. Below is an outline of the opposition's argument against SAFE, followed by the truth.

Fiction: SAFE for Salmon would destroy the commercial fishing industry in Oregon.

Fact: Gillnet landed salmon is only seven percent of Oregon commercial fishing, and 60 percent of all gillnet-landed salmon currently occurs in SAFE areas. The SAFE for Salmon compromise that came out of the 2011 Session would have reduced the gill net catch by an average of five percent or .0035% of total commercial fishing in Oregon. The gillnet fleet will still harvest 160,000 salmon on average from the late summer and fall seasons, combined with the year round SAFE fisheries.

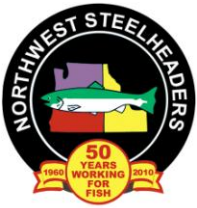
In recent year, removing gill nets from the river from January through July would have eliminated an average of only 36 hours of gillnetting on the mainstem, all of which and more could be made up in the SAFE areas. The overwhelming majority of gillnetting and harvest occurs in the fall and would have not been affected by the legislation. Moving these 36 hours into the SAFE zones would not "destroy a way of life". In fact, it would have helped preserve a way of life, because a ballot measure is being planned by another group for 2012 that seeks to completely ban gillnetting. In addition, historically gillnets were not used for summer chinook nor spring chinook for 30 and 25 years respectively before the SAFE areas were in place, and over those years, gillnetters did not go out of business and their catches were substantially less than what they're getting today.

Fiction: SAFE for Salmon has no conservation benefit to wild populations.

Fact: Of the 13 ESA-listed endangered and threatened salmon and steelhead populations in the Columbia River, 10 of them are in the lower Columbia during January through July. Furthermore, all three of the endangered populations are spring or summer runs that would benefit from the elimination of gillnets. Moving gillnets off the mainstem Columbia from January to July would have removed gillnets from the river for 77 percent of the ESA-listed steelhead and salmon runs, and provide a huge conservation benefit to sturgeon, as well.

The mortality rate for chinook released from tangle nets is 14.7 percent, which is approximately 50 percent higher than the mortality of sport-released fish, which is 10 percent.

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The smaller mesh size is effectively a gillnet for smaller species, increasing the catch of species smaller than salmon and thus increasing mortalities of steelhead and small sturgeon. The release mortality rate for steelhead caught in tangle nets is 18.5 percent, and release mortality rates for fish caught with large mesh gear (8-inch minimum) is at 40 percent for chinook and 30% for steelhead. Removing net fisheries from the mainstem Columbia River would provide a major conservation benefit for virtually all Columbia River fish runs and species.

Fiction: SAFE for Salmon will destroy jobs.

Fact: Gillnet fisherman regularly said that SAFE would cost jobs, but where was their evidence for this? They provided no studies to support this claim. Data from the current Mitchell Act Hatchery Environmental Impact Statement states that the average Lower Columbia River revenue for ALL gillnetters including salmon landed in the mainstem and SAFE areas was only \$8,443 – a small fraction of the gillnetter’s livelihood. The vast majority of the commercial fishermen that fish the Lower Columbia get the bulk of their income elsewhere, such as in Bristol Bay, Alaska, by crabbing and fishing off the Oregon Coast, or by some other job.

In addition, according to an economics study conducted by Southwick Associates in 2009, sport anglers would have spent an additional \$72.2 million if SAFE for Salmon was in effect from 2001 through 2008. This would represent an increase of 56.5 percent over the level of expenditures that actually occurred. Each year, anglers would have spent approximately \$11.6 million more in the Oregon economy. Anglers’ expenditures then stimulate rounds of economic effects. As a result of the additional angler expenditures, 179 additional jobs would have been supported each year, along with \$3 million in additional state and local tax revenues.

Fiction: SAFE areas are too crowded to allow for good gillnet fishing.

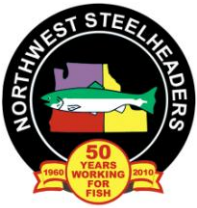
Fact: SAFE areas are not too crowded now to allow for the landing of approximately 100,000 salmon in the last two years. And gillnetters have not complained about over-crowding under the current system. Furthermore, in Bristol Bay, Alaska, where many Oregon gillnetters go to make up the bulk of their income, gillnetters are packed in the bay like sardines, but they don’t complain about that.

Things moved quickly the last month of the session. It was almost all about politics more than the merits of our bill. It’s unfortunate that politics didn’t allow the measure to get a vote on the floor of each house where we were confident it would have passed and been signed into the law by the Governor. It’s also unfortunate that the massive groundswell of grassroots support by the sportfishing community in the Willamette Valley was ignored by several key members of the House and Senate Rules committees. It’s also unfortunate that committee members of the party whose major focus this session was the economy and jobs, would not back a measure with clear benefits to the Oregon economy and job growth. And finally, it’s unfortunate that the commercial fishing industry failed to support a measure that ultimately would have helped preserve their way off of life ... but that’s politics for you.

There were several champions in the 2011 Session Legislature that deserve our thanks. Sen. Jackie Dingfelder really pushed hard for us throughout the session. Sen. Fred Girod worked constantly and diligently for SAFE, and Sen. Mark Hass was also very supportive. In addition, the following senators also deserve our thanks: Atkinson, Bates, Bonamici, Edwards, Monroe, Morse, and Starr.

In the House, Rep. Dave Hunt was enormously helpful, as was Rep. Bill Kennemer. Rep. Jules Bailey was with us from start to finish and spent considerable time behind the scenes stumping for us. Rep. Vic Gilliam worked to help us when things were particularly thorny at the end of session. We have so many allies in the House it’s unfortunate we weren’t able to get a floor vote, but our most visible

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and ardent supporters include: Representatives Barker, Cannon, Clem, Doherty, Garrett, Gelsler, Greenlick, Harker, Huffman, Johnson, Kotek, Matthews, Read, Smith, and Wand.

Steelheaders will not give up. Our sportfishing and wild fish runs are too important, and we are committed to building on the gains from this session by continuing the effort. We are currently strategizing what our next steps will be. There were enough positive signs and progress when compared to the 2009 session, that we are confident there will be positive movement in the right direction in the near future.