

The Columbian

Columbia River teeming with sockeye salmon

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WASHOUGAL -- Sweat beads on Les Clark's forehead as he shuffles a few feet from the controls of his 32-foot boat to pull fish from the nearby gill net.

3—It's a nearly one-man show aboard his boat, and fishing regulators have given 79-year-old Clark and other commercial fishermen just a six-hour window to catch as many sockeye as possible in the Lower Columbia River.

Miles upriver, just above Bonneville Dam, tribal fishermen are netting sockeye after sockeye from wood scaffolds anchored to large poles reaching over the water.

For much of the past half-century, the returns of sockeye — a fish listed as endangered in the Snake River in Idaho — have been meager at best in the Columbia River.

But this year, the fish commonly known as bluebacks are returning in numbers that haven't been seen since the mid-1950s, and both tribal and nontribal commercial fishermen are being allowed a swipe at the run.

So far, an estimated 1,000 sockeye have been caught on this day in the lower river, which is open for commercial sockeye fishing for the first time in four years.

Sportsmen get to keep two sockeye each a day through this weekend, while tribal scaffold fishing has no daily limits and is open year-round.

So far, about 194,000 sockeye have passed Bonneville Dam, and the run this year is expected to surpass 230,000, making it the largest since 1956, said Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission biologist Stuart Ellis. It's quite a contrast from the mere 25,400 that returned last year, he said.