

Columnist Henry Miller

How there can be fishing when you are hearing that there is none

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Now I know how Stephenie Fu and Andrew von Eschenbach feel, in a manner of speaking.

She's the contact person for something called the — totally true — "Tomato Products Wellness Council," which probably has some great mnemonic such as "TOP WELCO."

Von Eschenbach is a commissioner with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Fu's job right now, metaphorically speaking, is to make salsa out of salmonella.

Press releases from TOP WELCO are going out informing the public about how processed tomato products are safe (think stewed, diced, catsup, etc.), and how cooking the love apples in the can also "provides an enhanced value of lycopene," an anti-oxidant cancer-fighter.

Meanwhile, von Eschenbach is being quoted in articles running under screaming headlines with the running total of those sickened by salmonella (167 in 17 states since April).

Von Eschenbach also is explaining how government officials are scrambling to isolate the source of the contamination in fresh tomatoes as restaurants and burger chains nationwide toss tons of tomatoes into their dumpsters.

I was struck by the similarities between an outdoors writer and spokesfolks for the Tomato Products Wellness Council and the FDA when I was Googling for "Oregon salmon fishing" for an upcoming article.

And the top item on the list of several thousand hits was "The rumors and Media Hype about entire Oregon Coast Closing for Salmon Fishing is Bull----!"

Which is about half true, and grammatically incorrect.

"Rumors and Media Hype" is plural, so it should say "are Bull----!"

But back to the half-truth.

There is, in fact, salmon fishing available, albeit limited. A Chinook here. A coho there.

In fact, ocean coho fishing off the central Oregon coast opens June 22, as an example.

What fishing guides and charters call the "media hype" is, in fact, reporting of a major event: The collapse of West Coast salmon stocks this year.

Part of the problem stems from the fact that the fisher folks want the media to be more like the Tomato Products Wellness Council, and less like the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The truth is that we're both, and occasionally in the same article.

We put on our hard hats as guardians of the public interest when the occasion calls for it.

And we don our fishing hats and go out with the splash-and-giggle crowd when that's news.

So, yes, there will be series of stories about the cutbacks in bag limits and closed areas, lower allowed quotas and shorter seasons.

But at the same time, we're writing the previews and prospects for salmon fishing — all available fishing, for that matter — and riding along on the opening day for the all-depth halibut season to talk to happy anglers and snap pictures of them holding up their fish.

I believe it's called "reporting the facts," a quaint and somewhat novel approach in these days of spin and message control.

So some days we work for the Tomato Products Wellness Council, and others with the FDA food inspectors.

And some days, it's the same day, if that makes any sense.

And in between, reporters and editors just hope that readers who are following these stories remember both, and not just one or the other.