



Spring chinook angling to resume

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By ALLEN THOMAS **Columbian Staff Writer**

Coming Sunday is something few of us ever thought we'd see — an “opening day” of the Columbia River spring chinook salmon season.

The big river, upstream of the Hayden Island west power lines, opens on Sunday and fishing is scheduled to continue through April 30, other than some Tuesday closures to allow the gillnetters to get their fish without conflict with the sport fleet.

Downstream of the Hayden Island west power lines, fishing opens March 24 and continues through April 4.

Angling has been closed since Feb. 24. That's to minimize the catch of spring chinook headed for Oregon's Willamette River.

Historically, the Columbia River downstream of Interstate 5 was open beginning Jan. 1 for spring chinook. By about mid-February some die-hards started fishing, and perhaps 25 salmon or so got landed in February on a good year.

About mid-March, often there were enough fish in the river to make their pursuit real, unless it was a late-timed run, which happens some years.

Everything is topsy-turvy in 2008.

Most years, sport and commercial fishing have been designed to catch fish from a healthy Willamette River run and focused downstream of Interstate 5. When the upper Columbia run is large, too, then fishing also occurred upstream of I-5.

This year, the Willamette run is forecast to be poor 34,000, while a healthy upper Columbia run of 269,300 is projected. That's why the bulk of the fishery is upstream of the mouth of the Willamette.

“If the forecasts are on target, this should be a terrific year for spring chinook fishing,” said Pat Frazier, regional fish manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

The 12 days of angling downstream of Hayden Island gives sportsmen in Astoria, Cathlamet, Longview, Kalama, St. Helens, Rainier, Woodland and Ridgefield at least some time to fish close to home, yet limits the number of Willamette chinook caught.

So, now that spring chinook fishing will have been closed for 20 days come Sunday, what can we expect?

Spring chinook are such a premier fish, and there's so much pent-up demand to catch them, I'm looking for a big crowd on the water on Sunday.

I'll be amazed if parking at the boat ramps at Marine Park, Washougal, Beacon Rock and Hamilton Island aren't close to full. Some boaters will launch at Landsdorf Landing in the Vancouver Lake lowlands and motor upstream to the open waters.

There will be hoglines adjacent to Portland International Airport, along Government Island and at the downstream tip of Reed Island.

There will be significant effort between Beacon Rock and the Bonneville Dam boat deadline if the river flows are moderate, which appears likely.

It's hard to say how many fish are in the river. We'll know a lot more by Sunday night.

The count at Bonneville Dam through Monday was 20 spring chinook. The commercials caught five spring chinook in their sturgeon net season on Feb. 12-13 in the lower Columbia.

The netters had three sturgeon fishing periods — Feb. 21-22, Feb. 26-27 and Feb. 28-29 — between Hayden Island and Beacon Rock and landed seven spring salmon.

Here are a few other odds and ends relevant to this spring:

One fish limit — The catch limit is one spring chinook per day downstream of Bonneville Dam. The goal is to extend the sport season as long as possible.

Bonneville pool — Fishing also opens Sunday upstream of Bonneville Dam and is expected to continue through May 10.

The daily bag limit is two spring chinook between Bonneville and McNary dams.

This year, the 40 miles of Washington shoreline between Bonneville Dam and the Tower Island power lines are open.

The power lines are six miles downstream of The Dalles Dam. It is the first year since the early 1980s that bank anglers have the entire Washington shore of Bonneville pool.

"I think the best new location will be at the mouth of Drano Lake," said Joe Hymer, a Department of Fish and Wildlife biologist. "Fish stage there before entering the lake. A plug or lure cast from shore has good chance of attracting a chinook."

Parking is available on the west side of Drano Lake along the road to Little White Salmon National Fish Hatchery.

Access to the fishing area is underneath state Highway 14 and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad bridges.