



## **SURPRISING SURGE OF SOCKEYE RETURNING TO COLUMBIA RIVER OPENS MAINSTEM SPORT FISHERY**

June 20, 2008

Sockeye salmon are creating a stir on the Columbia River, surging past Bonneville Dam in unexpectedly high numbers and biting surprised steelhead anglers' hooks.

The 66,468 sockeye counted at Bonneville Dam through June 19 appears to be an all-time record since the dam was constructed in 1938, according to WDFW fishery biologist Joe Hymer. The 15,543 fish counted Thursday is the highest daily sockeye count at the dam since 1955. The peak daily count that year was 27,112 fish on July 7.

"They are catching sockeye like crazy, phenomenal numbers of sockeye," the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's Cindy LeFleur said Wednesday.

Unfortunately for the anglers, however, the sockeye have not been fair game. But that will change.

The Columbia River Compact late Thursday afternoon, based on the abnormally high counts at the dam, approved harvest and sale of sockeye in non-Indian commercial fisheries below Bonneville and in treaty fisheries above the dam. The Compact, which sets mainstem commercial fisheries, is made up of representatives of the Oregon and Washington departments of fish and wildlife directors.

Meeting later as a joint state panel, the ODFW's Steve Williams and WDFW's Bill Tweit approved the harvest of sockeye during a June 21-28 sport fishery on the mainstem from the river mouth up to Bonneville and June 21-July 31 above Bonneville.

Sockeye returns have historically bobbed up and down from year to year. Last year's return to the Columbia mouth was only 26,000 and the 2006 run numbers slightly more than 37,000.

The last year that sockeye retention was allowed on the mainstem was in 2004 when the return totaled 130,000 and an estimated 672 fish were caught, mostly in commercial fisheries. A return of 120,000 sockeye in 2001 allowed a harvest of 1,690 fish with most snared in gillnets.

But before that, little sockeye fishing was allowed on the mainstem dating back to the mid to late 1980s. The highest sport catch in decades was 226 sockeye in 1984, LeFleur said.

Mainstem fishing for sockeye has been limited since the listing in 1991 of the Snake River portion of the run under Endangered Species Act.

State officials had said that non-Indian fisheries for sockeye were not likely this year in the Columbia mainstem because the forecast return would barely meet management goals -- the escapement of 65,000 upper Columbia River sockeye as far as Priest Rapids Dam. Under average migration conditions that normally requires passage of 75,000 fish over Bonneville.

But with a count of 11,295 Wednesday swelling the 2008 total to 50,930, that escapement goal is within reach. The Wednesday daily count far surpasses the total run in 1995, a record low 9,667 fish.

The Technical Advisory Committee met Thursday morning to review the counts and decided that a run of at least 100,000 could be expected.

Passage is typically 50 percent complete by June 24 based on the recent 10-year average, and 28 percent complete based on the earliest timing.

Through Monday, 30,223 sockeye salmon had been counted forging over Bonneville's fish ladders, the highest total through that date in a half century or more, Hymer said. The total is higher than any recorded back to at least 1960, the earliest counts Hymer could find.

Last year only 4,130 sockeye had been counted at Bonneville through June 16, less than half the number passing the dam on Tuesday alone.

The June 17 tally of 9,407 sockeye brought this year's total to 39,630 as compared to the recent 10-year average of only 8,289 through that date. Passage data is posted online by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the dam. The link is: <https://www.nwp.usace.army.mil/op/fishdata/home.asp>

Commercial fisherman Gary Soderstrom told the Compact that sockeye are being seen in the lower river jumping out of the water, a common sight when abundant Alaska sockeye begin their spawning run but a rarity in the Columbia. The basin's sockeye run is the West Coast's southernmost.

"People who have fished all of their lives have never seen it" on the Columbia, Soderstrom said. He and other gill-net fishers urged the Compact to schedule a targeted sockeye fishery using smaller mesh nets to snare the "bluebacks."

"You're going to see them. They're there," said Soderstrom, who predicted a large sockeye run.

Scheduled chinook commercial fisheries require the use of 8-inch mesh or larger, which is intended to allow steelhead to slip through. Both steelhead and sockeye are smaller than chinook salmon.

ODFW and WDFW staff said the two scheduled fisheries would likely net 50 sockeye or fewer.

The Compact decided not to modify the non-tribal commercial fishery.

"At this time we need to be conservative," Williams said. He said he was concerned about the potential for smaller mesh nets also sweeping in steelhead, which are not allowed in commercial harvests. And while the run looks like it will be much larger than originally forecast, that's not a certainty.

Tweit said that the sockeye run appears to be at or near its peak. A directed commercial fishery now poses the threat of catching large numbers of fish and taking a huge bite out of the non-tribal allocation, which would allow the harvest of 1,000 fish combined in sport and commercial fisheries on a run of 100,000. The 1 percent limit is intended to hold down impacts on the Snake River portion of the sockeye run, which is listed as endangered.

On Monday's steelhead re-opener, anglers from Kalama to Vancouver told WDFW officials they had caught 12 sockeye. The season is now open for hatchery steelhead and chinook jacks. Summer chinook fisheries are scheduled from the Tongue Point/Rocky Point line near the river mouth upstream to Bonneville June 21-June 28, and from Bonneville upstream to Priest Rapids Dam June 16-July 31. Recreational fisheries above Priest Rapids Dam begin July 1.

Another dozen or so sockeye were caught and released at the Washougal dock Tuesday. In some years, the total estimated handle for the entire season is less than was sampled in each of this week's creel surveys, Hymer said.

"It's unusual that bank fishers that are out for hatchery steelhead and jacks are catching so many" sockeye, Hymer said. The small salmon are very focused spawners, pausing little to feed in the mainstem as they swim toward inland lakes. And their diet of plankton and krill is different than other salmon species.

"They don't bite typical gear" used to target steelhead and chinook, Hymer said. He and LeFleur theorized that sockeye catch is due to higher and cooler than normal river flows causing the fish to swim upriver along the banks

and the fact that they may be present in relatively large numbers.

"It's off to a real quick start," Hymer said of the sockeye run.

The 2008 pre-season forecast was for a total return of 75,600 sockeye to the Columbia basin with 13,700 bound for Wenatchee Lake and 61,200 for the Okanagan River's Osoyoos Lake. The Wenatchee and Okanagan are rivers branching from the mid-Columbia in central Washington.

About 700 Snake River sockeye are forecast to return, as counted at the mouth of the Columbia. The Wenatchee and Okanagan fish are not ESA listed. The Snake River stock, returning to the Stanley basin in central Idaho, is maintained through a hatchery captive brookstock program with no naturally produced fish returning to the Idaho basin over the past 10 years.

A return of 700 Snake River sockeye would be the largest run on record since 1979, according to the WDFW's and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's Jan. 31, 2008, Joint Staff report. The average 2002-2006 return to the Snake River is 64 with only 12 fish making it to the Stanley Basin.

Last year only 53 sockeye made it past the lower Snake's Lower Granite Dam, the eighth dam they must clear on their 900-mile journey from the Pacific Ocean to Idaho high country. Only four made it from Lower Granite to Sawtooth Hatchery, the final 400 miles or so of that journey.

The first Snake River sockeye of 2008 was counted Wednesday passing Ice Harbor Dam, the first of four hydro projects on the lower Snake River.