

WASHINGTON DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE REPORT ON IMPACTS TO FISHERIES IN 2020 RESULTING FROM COVID-19

This informational report summarizes how fisheries in Washington have been impacted by the need to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and how the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) expects the need for flexibility from a regulatory perspective when restrictions are lifted.

In support of Governor Inslee's Stay Home, Stay Healthy order, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife took the very difficult step of temporarily closing recreational fisheries statewide. Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, Washington's charter boat sector suspended taking recreational passengers earlier on their own accord. WDFW will revisit the closure on April 6 and is likely to extend it in whole or in part. A new announcement is anticipated on that date.

Fishing itself, in many cases, does not violate guidelines for complying with social distancing. However, the other elements involved—such as travel and shopping for supplies—bring people into contact with one another. Governor Inslee's direction is clear that Washingtonians should stay home. Travel from the population centers of the Puget Sound region to coastal communities can also place those communities at risk and may overtax local grocery stores and health facilities. Key boat access sites have also been closed by COVID-19 related actions taken by state and federal partner agencies and tribal governments. Crowding and increased contact at boat ramps in areas which remain open also poses undue risks.

The extraordinary measures are necessary for the health of all Washingtonians, actions taken by WDFW also consider the safety of our employees. With few exceptions such as, our Enforcement Program, to aid in public safety, and where employees must be on site to keep hatchery fish alive, all staff have been ordered to telework until further notice. This includes commercial and recreational sampling staff. The on-site, face-to-face nature of angler interviews puts people at risk of transmitting the coronavirus. Many salmon and steelhead fisheries require regular monitoring under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which includes conducting angler interviews at access sites surrounding the state's marine waters. Without this monitoring, recreational fisheries need to close, consistent with our ESA permits that allow them. In the case of the Pacific halibut fishery, it will be important to consider opening this popular fishery when it is safe for staff to collect data necessary to monitor catch relative to federal harvest quotas.

The Governor's order also closes all businesses except businesses deemed to be essential. Together with agricultural and food production activities, commercial fisheries and workers supporting commercial fishing have received that designation. Commercial fisheries therefore remain open. However, we recognize the major disruption to regular seafood markets that have occurred and that are likely to continue. We also recognize that limitations to our ability to sample and monitor individual commercial fisheries due to COVID-19 may affect if and how they are implemented in the future.

WDFW appreciates the immediate response from the National Marine Fisheries Service to reach out to state managers to learn and discuss how our fisheries have been impacted by COVID-19. It has been clear that there is broad agreement in the need for flexibility, and a willingness to adapt to these impacts such as fishery closures. As an example, the recreational halibut fishery will likely need to be prosecuted very differently from what was envisioned when the seasons structures were developed and approved by the Pacific Fishery Management Council in the fall of 2019. Allowing changes such as adjusting open fishing days or season dates from what was originally planned will not only recover lost fishing opportunity to Washington anglers but will provide much needed economic support for the coastal communities that rely on the benefit that these fisheries bring.

WDFW's mission is to provide sustainable fish and wildlife recreational and commercial benefits. We will work with our partners and remain flexible and look forward to providing as much access and economic opportunities as possible, when it is safe to do so.