

TESTIMONY OF THE QUINULT INDIAN NATION
PRECAUTIONARY MANAGEMENT NEEDED FOR PRESEASON PLANNING
FOR 2021 OCEAN SALMON FISHERIES ON COHO SALMON

Several naturally spawning coho stocks (Queets, Snohomish & Strait of Juan de Fuca) are being managed in accordance with PFMC-adopted rebuilding plans after they were declared to be overfished in 2018. Forecasts for Washington coastal natural coho stocks are the lowest since 2016. Queets coho are forecast to be below the low end of its escapement range.

In stark contrast, the 2021 forecast for the Oregon Production Index Area Hatchery (OPIH) stock is projected to exceed 1.6 million coho, the highest in over twenty years. If the Columbia River early and late hatchery coho returns do not meet expectations then planned ocean fisheries would have a higher impact on natural stocks. This could exacerbate the natural coho issues mentioned in this statement and result in unforeseen consequences. We urge a precautionary management approach when developing 2021 coho fisheries.

Because ocean fisheries operate on mixed stocks, abundance forecasts are interdependent. Overly optimistic abundance projections for large stocks can result in excessive harvest of other comingled stocks. The recent performance of the OPIH forecasts has not instilled confidence. Forecasts for this stock have been overly optimistic in five of the past years since 2015; some forecasts have been over three times the magnitude of postseason estimates.

Internationally, the U.S. has an obligation to meet the provisions of the Southern Coho Management Plan adopted by the Pacific Salmon Commission. In 2019, southern U.S. fisheries exceeded the allowable exploitation rates (ER) associated with multiple postseason abundance categories, including the U.S. Interior Fraser Cap (the ER was 13.3%; the cap is 10%). The PST postseason coho analysis referenced lower than forecasted abundances for the Columbia River early and late hatchery stocks as a likely factor in the overage, in addition to environmental variables.

The reliability of abundance forecasts for coho is becoming increasingly uncertain and errors are likely to lead to extraordinary circumstances mentioned in the coho rebuilding plans for natural Washington Coastal and Puget Sound coho stocks. We urge the Council to apply precautionary management principles during the 2021 preseason fishery planning process and conduct a methodology review for the OPIH coho forecast.