

Shorebased Whiting Cooperative

Salmon Mitigation Plan Postseason Report on the 2023 Pacific Whiting Fishery

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Purpose of Report

The Shorebased Whiting Cooperative is submitting a Salmon Mitigation Plan (SMP) Report for the 2023 season on behalf of its membership, all of whom are party to SMP-2023-02. This report is intended to disclose all information required or identified in 50 CFR 660.113(e)(6).

SMP Report Requirements

(6) ***SMP postseason report.*** The designated SMP representative for an approved SMP must submit a written postseason report to NMFS and the Council for the year in which the SMP was approved.

(i) ***Submission deadline.*** The SMP postseason report must be received by NMFS and the Council no later than March 31 of the year following that in which the SMP was approved.

(ii) ***Information requirements.*** The SMP postseason report must contain, at a minimum, the following information:

(A) Name of the SMP and SMP identification number.

(B) A comprehensive description of Chinook salmon bycatch avoidance measures used in the fishing year in which the SMP was approved, including but not limited to, information sharing, area closures, movement rules, salmon excluder use, and internal bycatch guidelines.

(C) An evaluation of the effectiveness of these avoidance measures in minimizing Chinook salmon bycatch.

(D) A description of any amendments to the terms of the SMP that were approved by NMFS during the fishing year in which the SMP was approved and the reasons the amendments to the SMP were made.

(A) Name of the SMP and SMP identification number.

Salmon Mitigation Plan for the Shorebased Whiting Cooperative. SMP identification number: SMP-2023-02

(B) A comprehensive description of Chinook salmon bycatch avoidance measures used in the fishing year in which the SMP was approved, including but not limited to, information sharing, area closures, movement rules, salmon excluder use, and internal bycatch guidelines.

The Shorebased Whiting Cooperative relied on timely information sharing, hot spot closures and salmon excluders to minimize Chinook salmon encounters in 2023.

Near real time catch data was shared with all SWC members. The trip-by-trip data allowed vessels to identify when and where Chinook salmon migrations overlapped whiting grounds. In addition to sharing information amongst Cooperative member vessels, near real time catch data was also distributed to the At-sea Sectors.

On two occasions during the 2023 fishing season, the Cooperative's manager utilized the hot spot closure authority to temporarily close areas of high seasonal Chinook bycatch. One catcher vessel encountered a chinook lightning strike and withing 8 hours of offloading, a hot spot closure was implemented. The second closure was implemented in response to chronic elevated chinook bycatch that accumulated over the course of a week. Both closures were located off Northern Washington and remained in place for the duration of the season. The hot spot closures served to redistribute fishing effort away from high bycatch areas.

The Shorebased Whiting Cooperative also utilized salmon excluders to reduce incidental Chinook catch. The excluders are designed with mesh panels that allow Chinook, which are stronger swimmers than whiting, to escape before moving back into the codend.

(C) An evaluation of the effectiveness of these avoidance measures in minimizing Chinook salmon bycatch.

The SWC members caught 1,056 Chinook, 9.6% of the Chinook cap, while landing 178,300,156 lbs of whiting. While Chinook salmon persisted on the whiting fishing grounds, Cooperative members were able to minimize encounters by effectively utilizing near real time communication, salmon excluders and closing hot spots when needed.

All of the Cooperative's member vessels are committed to limiting chinook encounters to the extent practicable. By sharing and monitoring near real time catch data, the vessels were able to identify when Chinook were present or likely to be in an area. This further allowed them to effectively shift their fishing effort to areas less likely to have Chinook.

Recent EFP studies in the Bering Sea Pollock fishery have found salmon excluders to have a 15-30% escapement rate when used by vessels with similar horsepower and gear configurations to SWC members. The effectiveness of salmon excluders is largely dependent on the individual vessel; however, these studies support the cooperative's use of excluders as an effective mitigation tool.

Parties to the SMP operate under some of the best information and gear available to the industry; however, lightning strikes can and do still occur. The Cooperative was able to respond almost immediately on two occasions when vessels encountered Chinook hits and implement hot spot closures. The quick response time was in part a product of the SWC's membership agreement, which provides the manager automatic hot spot closure authority. The closures were implemented upon thorough review of the fleet's in-season tow data at that time of the year. The temporary hot spot closures were effective at preventing other vessels from incurring additional Chinook bycatch in the problem areas and shifting effort to alternative areas.

(D) A description of any amendments to the terms of the SMP that were approved by NMFS during the fishing year in which the SMP was approved and the reasons the amendments to the SMP were made.

One amendment to the terms of the SMP was approved by NMFS in 2023. Prior to the season start date, F/V Pegasus joined the Shorebased Whiting Cooperative. The Cooperative submitted an amendment to add the F/V Pegasus to the list of vessels party to the SMP.