



ADAPTING TO CHANGE

Fishing Families, Businesses, Communities, and Regions

Survey of Gillnetters in Oregon and Washington: *Summary of Results*

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Background

These are the results of a survey of southwestern Washington and northwestern Oregon gillnetters. The survey attempted to evaluate the adequacy of salmon disaster relief programs and to determine how gillnetters were adapting to changes in the fishery.

Salmon availability is highly variable, but the trend in the Pacific Northwest has been downward. This decline has occurred despite efforts to improve fishing, including:

- The 1938 Mitchell Act, which was supposed to mitigate damages to salmon stocks lost as a result of construction of hydroelectric dams. Congress did not fund the Act until 1949 and periodically discusses cutting off funding for hatcheries built to replace lost salmon runs;
- The Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act, passed in March 1976, which had the improvement of fishing as a primary goal;
- The Northwest Power Planning Act of 1980, which sought to assign responsibility of Columbia River dams for salmon declines; and

- The 1985 Pacific Salmon Treaty, which attempted to settle fishing relations between Alaska, British Columbia, and the states of California, Oregon, and Washington.

Coupled with these federal policy initiatives were equally significant environmental changes, ranging from a long drought in the late 1980s and early 1990s and altered ocean conditions since the mid-1970s, to increased populations of some marine mammals. In addition, significant changes occurred in peoples' attitudes toward natural resources—including growing concerns about habitat and biodiversity loss, increased emphasis on protecting wild salmon, and concerns that efforts to produce more salmon had actually caused declines in salmon runs.

These factors combined to force gillnetters to make significant changes. Since 1974, the number of Columbia River spring Chinook available to the lower river gillnet fishery have not exceeded 50% of the 1970–75 average. Fall Chinook catches were 50% of the 1970–75 average in only 6 of the last 20 years. Since 1988, Columbia River salmon catches have decreased by more than 90%. The mainstem Columbia River gillnet fishery has been closed since 1994.

Disaster Relief Programs

Because of the severe decline in salmon fishing, Washington and Oregon requested help from the federal government. In 1994 several federally funded programs were launched to assist people in and associated with the salmon fishery.

The disaster relief unemployment insurance program was based on the concept that the 1993 and 1994 salmon decline could be attributed to ecological factors. Because fishing is highly variable from year to year and because a drought and unfavorable oceanic conditions had occurred over several years, applicants were allowed to base their unemployment claims on their fishing record dating back to 1988. Claims, however, were limited by current household income. Table 1 shows the number of applicants and d average amount received in each state.

Table 1

State	No. of applicants	No. of recipients	Total paid	Average payment
California	674	477	1,327,105	\$2,782
Oregon	951	648	2,035,881	\$3,142
Washington	1737	1695	5,824,343	\$3,436
Coastwide	3362	2790	9,187,329	\$3,293

Disaster unemployment insurance expenditures in California, Oregon, and Washington for the 1994 salmon season

Under the Northwest Emergency Assistance Plan, the Department of Commerce sponsored three programs: habitat restoration jobs, test fishing/data gathering, and a Washington license

buyout. In the test fishing and data-gathering projects, fishermen were hired to do biological research.

The largest program, and the one with the highest average payments, was the Washington buyout program, which spent nearly \$4 million retiring Washington salmon troll, Columbia River gillnet, and Washington charter licenses. Table 2 shows the number of licenses purchased and the average price paid.¹

Table 2

License	Number	Bids Ranked	Licenses Retired	Avg Cost/License
Troll	666	252	190	\$9,100
Col. River Gillnet	506	160	83	\$22,000
Charter	206	47	24	\$13,900
Total	1,378	459	302	\$13,100

Washington Buyout Summary

Are these programs meeting the needs of gillnetters? To learn their views we conducted a survey from October 23 through December 29, 1995. The survey asked about the effectiveness of disaster relief programs, the adjustments made by gillnetters, their view no what would help the salmon resource, and general background information.

¹Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Vessel Permit Buy Out Program Final Report (September 1995).

Summary of Recommendations

The following are gillnetters' recommendations drawn from the survey responses and comments detailed below. Gillnetters are a diverse population, but their responses suggest a majority would give these recommendations.

Disaster relief programs:

- Implement fair, voluntary buyout/buyback programs in Oregon and Washington that compensate fishermen for their boats, gear, nets, and permits or licenses.
- Implement leaseback programs for people who do not want to quit fishing.
- Expand habitat restoration programs so that more people are eligible. Give assistance to people who want to move into a different line of business. Provide low-interest loans and long-term refinancing. Extend the disaster relief programs—they were needed more in 1995 but less assistance was available.
- Distribute benefits fairly and equally. People who take additional jobs should not be penalized for trying to adapt. Benefits should be in proportion to what was lost in fishing income.

The future of the resource:

- Gillnetters are willing to sacrifice to improve the resource, but all factors of salmon mortality—dams, sports fisheries, habitat loss, bycatch, marine mammals, etc.—should sacrifice in proportion to their impact on salmon runs. Those who benefit from the power system should be held accountable, and should compensate gillnetters for damage done to salmon runs.

- Improve fish passage facilities at dams; control pollution and industrialization in habitat areas, and improve salmon habitat. Improve control of predators, including seals and sea lions, predatory fish, and birds.

Fisheries management:

- Reduce the influence of politics on decisions regarding fisheries. Learn from the example of Alaska. Agencies should listen to and learn from fishermen.
- Stop the sale of hatchery fish and the exportation of salmon eggs to foreign countries. Allow hatchery fish to continue upstream to spawn naturally.
- Increase the number and quality of terminal fisheries.

Other recommendations/comments:

- Recognize that gillnetting is a major contributor to the economies of southwestern Washington and northwestern Oregon. In addition to income from local fisheries, gillnetters also bring back incomes, some substantial, from Alaska and other distant fisheries.
- Lower license fees for people who don't fish in a given year; eliminate the requirement to renew licenses every year, and the requirement to fish to keep licenses.
- The salmon disaster affects whole communities. Assistance should also be available for fish buyers, cannery workers, charter operators, deckhands, and others who rely on salmon.

Survey Results

Surveys were sent to 666 licensed gillnetters. Fifty-three percent (N=355) of the surveys were returned. The survey covered Columbia River, Willapa Bay and Gray's Harbor owners of gillnetting licenses—364 in Washington and 302 in Oregon.²

Demographics

The average respondent was 50 years old, and 56 percent were between 40 and 60 years of age. Sixty percent of the gillnetters were from families who had been fishing for two or three generations, and 17% of the families had fished for four generations or more.

On average, gillnetters had started commercially fishing at age 20. Only 2% of the respondents said they had fished commercially for five years or less. Eight percent had fished for 6–10 years; 15% for 11–20 years; 34% for 21–30 years; 21% for 31–40 years; 3% for 41–50 years; and 9% for more than 50 years. In total, 76% had fished commercially for more than 20 years.

The percentage of income earned from gillnetting in Oregon and Washington in an “average year” was 43%. In 1994, this dropped to 10% and in 1995 to 7%, although nearly two thirds said that in 1995 they earned 1% or less of their income from gillnetting. Sixty-five percent had gillnetted every year since 1988, the last peak fishing year. Eighteen percent did not fish in 1995.

Respondents were asked to rate their situations today versus five years ago. Most felt that their

economic, family, and overall situations had worsened during the last five years.

Table 3



Eighty percent of the gillnetters were married; 8% were single; 6% were divorced or separated; 5% lived with a partner; and 1% were widowed.

Educational backgrounds and incomes were distributed as follows:

Educational background

Some high school	11%
High school diploma	28%
Some college	33%
Technical training	6%
College diploma	16%
Post graduate	7%

Income

Less than \$15,000/year	10%
\$15,000–\$25,000/year	20%
\$15,000–\$25,000/year	20%
\$15,000–\$25,000/year	24%
\$15,000–\$25,000/year	16%
Over \$75,000/year	10%

Three-fourths lived in northwestern Oregon or southwestern Washington. The rest lived in the Portland and Seattle metropolitan areas, California, Alaska, eastern Oregon and Washington, or other states.

²To evaluate non-response bias, a random sample of non-respondents was contacted by telephone. The largest number of non-respondents had not used disaster relief programs and did not think the survey was targeted at them. Eight percent of the non-respondents contacted refused to respond to the survey, fearing that government would use the survey results against them. We were unable to reach non-respondent gillnetters who lacked telephone service, as well as those who were unavailable because they were participating in other fisheries. The total refusal rate for the survey was five percent.

Gillnetter Views

In general, the gillnetters expressed extreme frustration with the salmon crisis and the disaster relief programs. We include some of their voices along with the tabulations of the data. Although many were angry, they also demonstrated a sense of humor and compassion for others.

It has been a very sorrowful time for our family. It's like having a death in the family.

Large corporations and urban areas are capitalizing on the destruction of this resource and profiting in the billions. These people should be held accountable for the environmental destruction they are causing, for they are the voters that shoved the environmental laws down the rural areas' throats.

Less studies. Do something. Get the Goddam politics out of this.

Society needs to understand that salmon can't be saved by eliminating harvest while it conducts business as usual.

I didn't leave [the] fishery—the fishery left ME!!

Although many people received disaster relief unemployment insurance, others saw their claims rejected, and many said that they had received too little assistance while others with higher incomes received more. In addition, those who found other jobs to help them through lean times found that those jobs became liabilities when they were applying for disaster relief. They felt they were being punished for trying to earn money for themselves and their families. Most felt the disaster unemployment insurance was needed even more in 1995, when it was no longer available.

The following are representative comments:

The unemployment insurance program was a laugh. I applied and was turned down. I made \$6000 doing work during the closed season...the hearings judge said I made too much...but those from Alaska with five-figure

earnings got the insurance, as well as a fellow who had not fished for ten years and leases his permit...

I had to leave Washington and move to Alaska for work after the fishing was shut down. I also got divorced when the fishing went down because of money problems and stress...I was forced to take another job. I would have remained fishing but could not support my family any longer. I feel even though I'm working I am entitled to some relief. The unemployment insurance paid me about \$800. Not enough! My business has been shut down. I want compensation.

Washington's vessel license buyout received a great deal of attention both in Oregon and Washington. In Oregon, gillnetters said they wanted a buyout like Washington's, while in Washington many people said the buyout was insufficient, either paying them too little for their licenses or leaving them with thousands of dollars worth of useless gear. Respondents repeatedly stressed their desire for a "fair, complete buyout" of boats, licenses and gear.

Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) was strongly criticized by many Washington gillnetters who claimed that it was poorly managed and biased towards sports fishing. Meanwhile, respondents tended to praise Alaska's fishery management. Comments about Oregon's fishery management usually related to the need for a buyback program in Oregon.

Respondents spoke positively of the habitat restoration jobs program, although there did not seem to be enough jobs to go around:

Habitat job has saved us this year, as Young's Bay and Columbia River fishing was so bad...

I enjoy working on the habitat restoration crew. I am also very involved in an enhancement program...and I feel, if the buyback program continues, the ones of us that are left in the end, primarily the serious fisher-

men, will have a good chance of making a living out of it.

For habitat restoration, you had to make less than \$25,000...We studied the program and found that 80% of fishermen missed being eligible by \$1,000–\$10,000. Only 11 people qualified out of 375 gillnetters, and three out of 130 charters. It sounded good, but it ruled out people and didn't help them.

Other programs, including test fishing or “at-sea research,” disaster relief loans, and educational outreach via the Sea Grant Fishing Families Project (formerly Fishing Dependent Families Project), were less well-known.

Many respondents felt strongly that they were being treated unfairly by the state and federal government and by other user groups. The BPA and other hydro projects, the WDFW, aluminum companies, sports fishing interests, and those who sell salmon eggs to foreign countries were most often mentioned.

We used to be a family business—fishing, gillnetting and trolling from 1972 to 1984 when politics forced us into no livelihood and worse each year!

I have been a Columbia River gillnetter for 34 years. I am truly appalled at the government's answer to the plight of the fisherman. Another survey, another survey, and yet, another survey! Well, I guess we know where the money is going.

Why have Washington state salmon eggs been sold throughout the world to set up fish farms in direct competition with the state's fishing industry?

As a subsequent generation fisherman, my forefathers all made a comfortable living fishing on the Columbia. Then as the dams and other habitat destruction listed in this survey diminished the salmon's ability to

renew themselves, my father had to finally fish in Alaska to make ends meet. Now Bristol Bay is the majority of my salmon fishing income.

Responses from those people whose entire livelihood depended on gillnetting were strongly pessimistic about the future of the industry, as reflected by these comments:

For the near future, salmon fishing looks very dismal. Society has taken its toll—mother nature has been decimated. It is such a sorry situation.

We still eat but we've wiped out our savings and our debts mount, now to over \$170,000. We'll probably lose our house before it's over.

I would appreciate any help or advice in my situation...such as further information on buyback or a very good recipe on how to prepare and digest one gillnet boat as I feel I will eventually have to eat it!

The commercial fleet in Washington has been decimated to a point that it is without resources to even present their case. The few individuals left, with the mental stamina to try to protect the industry, are doing so at enormous costs to themselves, both financially and psychologically, with less opportunity to make a living in the industry than ever before.

It's over with; sports will end up with the whole fishery.

Views on Disaster Relief

The two questions, *Which disaster relief programs are you familiar with?* and *In which program or programs did you participate?* showed

that the disaster unemployment insurance and the WDFW license buyout program were the best known and most used:

	% Familiar	% Participated
Disaster unemployment insurance	62	45
WDFW vessel license buyout program	56	16
Habitat restoration jobs	41	4
Test fishing research jobs	25	2
Disaster relief loans	25	4
Assistance from Sea Grant Fishing Families Project	6	*
Assistance from a fishermen's association or group	4	*
Other help or services	4	2

* Less than 1%

Forty-one percent of the respondents did not participate or were rejected by the programs. Of the 59% who received help, 17% participated in two programs. The WDFW buyout and disaster unemployment insurance were the most common joint programs. Two percent participated in three programs.

How did you find out about these programs?

Word of mouth	55%
Newsletter	24%
Newspaper	19%
Industry or trade association	16%
State Employment Office	11%
Did not know about them	6%
Fishing Dependent Families Project	1%
Other	6%

The most frequently cited sources of information were the *Salmon For All* newsletter, the *Daily Astorian*, and a letter sent by the Washington State Department of Fisheries and Wildlife.

Did you get what you needed from the disaster relief programs?

Of the 172 responses to this question, 11% said yes, 75% said no, and 13% gave indeterminate responses. Individual comments follow:

We got a temporary bandage for a long-term condition.

Disaster unemployment insurance helped. Disaster loan money required a lot of paperwork [for] little money.

[I used the money] to buy a new crab boat, but the State only did half of what they promised so they nearly bankrupted me. Their attitude? Oh well! Another day!

Tried to participate in habitat restoration program but was not eligible although I have habitat restoration knowledge.

I feel this would have been simply taking government welfare to recoup my dumb investments.

I would like to see a buyout where value of equipment (investment) is considered, especially for us who paid high prices with no good seasons following.

Even though my gillnet business has suffered major losses, I was denied because I have other income. Being in this business has caused income loss to my family instead of gain for the last few years. It was once an asset.

We did hours of paperwork and got rejected. Who were these loans for if not for a full time fishing family? We were disgusted.

I desperately need a habitat job in Columbia or Clatsop county.

The [disaster unemployment insurance] was very helpful. The disaster relief loan program was a joke on fishing families because they didn't qualify from the start.

What were the funds used for?

The 186 people who said they had participated in a disaster relief program indicated that funds were used in the following ways:

Family expenses	77%
Paying off a loan or loans	15%
Purchasing salmon fishing equipment or supplies	13%
Purchasing equipment to enter a new fishery	6%
Purchasing equipment required by the Coast Guard	5%
Other	10%

If you did not use these programs, why not?

Fifty-nine percent did not participate in one or more of the programs for the following reasons.

Did not think I was eligible	37%
Claim was rejected	26%
Did not know about them	19%
Too much paperwork	15%
Do not think this is the right approach	14%
Did not have time or money to apply	5%
Other	6%

Other comments:

I've had an investment in this fishery for 23 years. The fact that I got a job to support my family while the seasons dwindled was the cause of my claim rejection. I've owned my own boat, gear and permit, which is more than boat pullers have had invested, and they still got insurance.

Buyout program would have only gave a fraction of what I had invested.

Did not need the additional income—felt funds needed by other fishing families more.

I didn't want to use, as I have never received public assistance before.

Had three days to send in paperwork. Took many phone calls to talk to correct person, treated us like we were stealing government money.

What has been, or would have been, most helpful for you in adjusting to the decreased opportunities to fish for salmon?

Out of the 264 responses to this open-ended question, 41% referred to a buyout or leaseback program.

Those from Oregon said they wanted a buyout program, while those from Washington often said they wanted a better buyout program. The following comments are drawn from question responses that referred to a buyout program:

A complete license, boat and equipment buy out [with] BPA, DSI, NMFS footing the bill—the dams have cost me my livelihood.

Buy permit for what I paid for it and buy back fishing nets. I paid [twice as much] for my Columbia River permit as the state bought it back for. The state left me with my gear.

Disaster aid was helpful for just the one year. Oregon permit buyback would be most helpful for retirement from a lifetime of fishing, but for younger members we need to continue the fight to bring back the salmon runs.

[It would be helpful] if I could sell my permit for a fair price and use the money to get into a new business.

A lease buyback is the only real effective way to help. I don't have any boat payments, but I do have my retirement, heritage, culture, life style and a huge investment sitting idle for how many years?

Pay the fishermen for their investments in boats and gear.

Everybody in the NW benefits from the dams and industry created from them. But they aren't concerned about the loss the commercial fishermen sustained from the loss of fish.

Other comments about what would be helpful follow. Common themes were equal allocation of the resource and programs to help fishermen move into other areas of business:

BPA-subsidized payments not to fish the Columbia, about \$5000 per year.

Basically, the opportunity to earn money from my fishing business. I have thousands of

dollars in gear (nets, etc.) and a fishing boat (with insurance and upkeep) that I have no way of paying for because of the lack of fishing time.

Evenhandedness in allocation of resource; an appearance of effort on the part of WDFW to use in-season management rather than relying on faulty predictions.

The psychological battering from biased department officials is as painful as the financial deprivation .

Finding work. I am waiting for habitat job locally, I'm also taking care of my invalid parents.

If all who fish for salmon in the Columbia would sacrifice their fishing as much as we have had to do so as to rejuvenate the salmon runs. I mean Indians and sport fishers as well.

I figured that down the road our fish runs would return, and once again commercial fishing on the Columbia would be, before the year 2000.

If you didn't fish, the expensive license fee should be waived. [Washington] Dept. of Fisheries said us gillnetters will have to take the big hit to save salmon. Then they jab us with license fees averaging \$1000 per fisherman.

Jobs that some of us older fishermen could have done. I am 72 years old and there [are] more like me [who] were not considered at all.

Some type of loan program to expand into another fishery or even different type of business.

To make ends meet, myself and nearly every other salmon fisherman has had to enter into other fisheries or other part-time employment opportunities to make a living. To take advantage of the temporary disaster relief jobs is impossible for many fishermen who need them most. That is why the disaster

unemployment insurance was most suitable for many.

How have you responded to reductions in Oregon and Washington gillnetting?

Relied more on gillnetting in other areas	37%
Relied more on other fisheries	31%
Crab	59%
Sturgeon	23%
Albacore	14%
Trawl	6%
Other (including charter, shrimp, smelt, scallop, and others)	35%
Have taken [or had] another job to fill in for lost income	39%
Have sold boat, property, equipment, or gear	8%
Have leased out my license and/or boat	3%
Have left fishing entirely because...	10%
could not make a living	64%
season is too short	57%
too expensive to maintain license	33%
chose to retire	15%
lost interest	12%
live on less (written in)	10%
other	11%
Have not been affected that much	3%
Other	21%

Individuals' comments give a stronger sense of the frustration they feel:

Lived like a miser. Tried to get by on as little as possible.

Fishermen are shoved into small areas with short seasons and to remain solvent fish in bad weather. The new required safety equipment sets them even further back and they fish in even worse weather. The Coast Guard is so busy boarding boats and checking stickers and using their budgets to patrol the handful of fishermen left, that buoys are not maintained and Coast Guard stations are closed.

We have been processing our own fish, and marketing them.

Slowly going bankrupt.

I need an occupational change that pays well, exciting and a damn good retirement program! Such as extortion, armed robbery, hell anything is better than this.

Depleted life savings

Had to move, sell home, start totally over.

Have looked for other opportunities of employment. Have had to deal with depression in my life because of lost fishing opportunities and added financial burden.

Delayed retirement plans (expected to continue commercial fishing in “retirement”)

Logged some family timber and mortgaged my home. Wife has taken several temporary jobs.

Many years ago it was clear I could not make a living gillnetting—so I found a job.

Salmon is my secondary income. Would get out of gillnetting if I could get a good price for my permit.

Still have all equipment, boat, etc., and permit. Can't decide what to do. Perhaps make a planter out of the \$40,000 boat!

Views on Resource Management

A series of questions on distributive justice asked people to express their agreement with the following statements:

A. *Each person is responsible for their own future no matter what happens. This is how capitalism works. People should have the right to fail.*

Comments added by those who disagreed with this statement noted that when failure was caused by an uncontrollable factor (for example government decisions), the statement did not hold true.

The average response was 3.0, as shown in Table 4.

B. *Society works best when it helps people when unexpected change occurs. A system of social insurance that assists people in times of need is best.* The average response (Table 5) was 2.1.

C. *Past participation in salmon fishing gives the right to fish. When people lose the opportunity to fish, society should compensate them.* The average response (Table 6) was 1.6.

Table 4

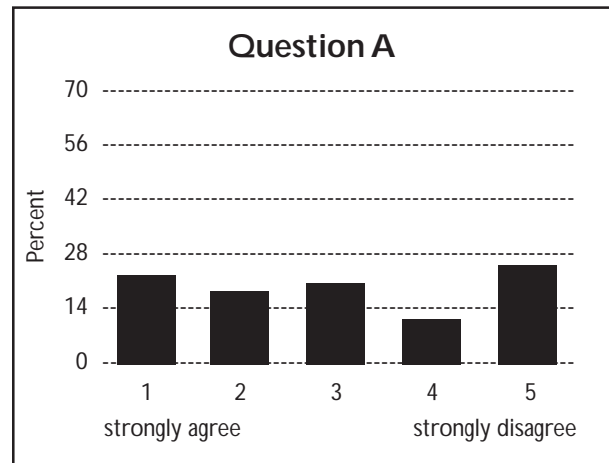


Table 5

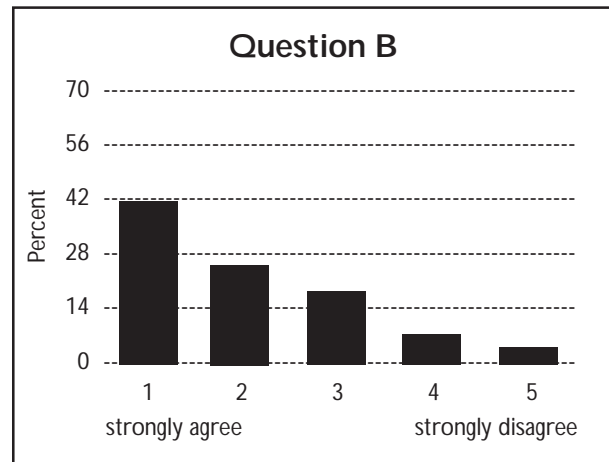
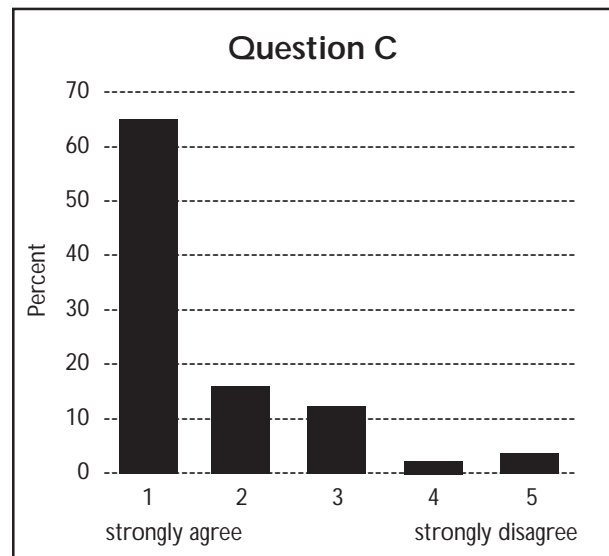


Table 6



The strong feelings of gillnetters reflect their view that society has taken away their opportunity to fish.

Other individual comments:

Failing on my own is one thing; failing because someone is destroying your business is different.

When fishing time is lost from natural causes [it's] bad enough, but when caused by dams and industry, yes, [we] should be compensated.

This is a government-sponsored disaster and the government should pay for lost opportunity.

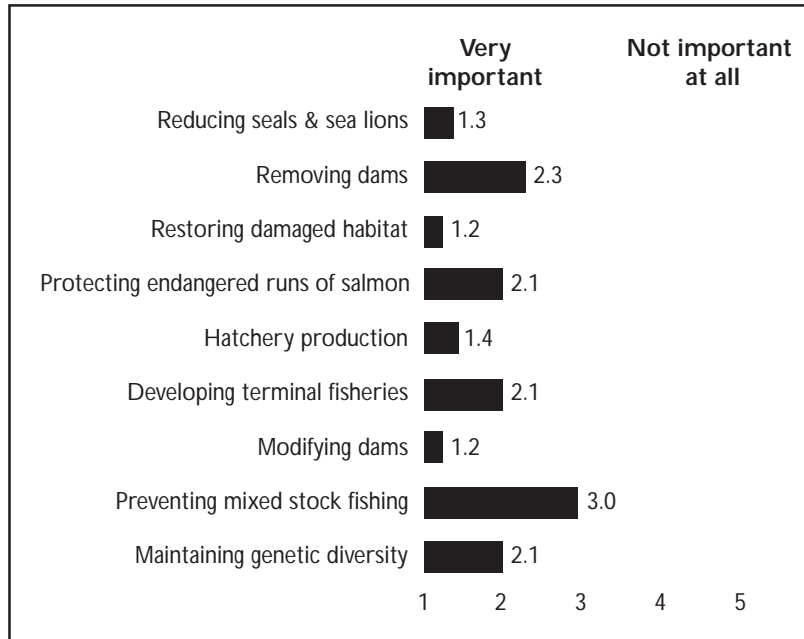
Would like to see unemployed aluminum workers and dry land farmers wandering streets—they have killed more salmon than the gillnet fleet has! They are partaking in the demise of a fishery that would provide for my family and thousands of others in perpetuity—instead I have job on low end of scale—they are pooching out aluminum ingots that are continually worth less on the world market—AND I help pay for it each month in PPL electric bill. Insult = injury.

Most fishermen with something on the ball would find something else to do instead of waiting around to be spoon-fed by the government.

I do not feel that society owes me anything. However I do feel that the industries that have benefited from salmon and salmon habitat destruction do owe society. If habitat is restored, my job and livelihood will in turn be restored.

How important are the following to enhance the salmon fishery?

Table 7



Respondents had a rich variety of suggestions for improving the future of salmon fishing. These ranged from better control of predators, particularly seals and cormorants, to trying to build a consensus between all user groups.

What really would help is for those who have benefited from salmon habitat destruction (hydro, aluminum, irrigation, navigation, poor logging practices) to step to the goddam plate and make a commitment to right past wrongs and work with, instead of against, salmon industries.

All aspects of society that negatively impact salmon should equally share the burden of restoration, including agriculture, ranching, logging, urban and industrial development, dams, aluminum smelters, nuclear power, pollution (both point and non-point), roads and highways, and yes even fishing (sport, commercial and Indian). What society has done is make a few (commercial fishing) pay for the past sins of all.

Count every fish landed by sport fleet even if it means searching each and every boat.

If any fish are to survive in the Columbia Basin, many different interest groups will have to compromise.

Take the future of the salmon out of politicians' hands and give it to the people that know fish.

If indeed the definition of wild salmon can be proven on some stocks, I think that protecting endangered stocks [is] very important. But what so often happens is that a stock that was eliminated 75 years ago due to habitat loss or over-fishing has been rebuilt by hatchery strays that have turned self-sustaining, and some "bleeding heart" comes in and declares them an endangered stock, stops hatchery production and will not allow hatchery stocks to be used to augment low returns.

The fish will bounce back.

If you would send a survey out and ask the gillnetters if they would sit on the beach for the next five years or more to save the salmon, they would say yes, but you will never find another user group, whether it be from other fishing groups, irrigated agriculture, utility companies or the aluminum industry, ever make such a commitment.

This research is part of a larger project entitled Adapting to Change: Fishing Families, Businesses, Communities, and Regions. The project, sponsored by Oregon Sea Grant, seeks to provide research-based information about cycles of change that affect U.S. fisheries and the people and communities involved in them. Beneficiaries of such information include policymakers, fisheries managers, and fishing communities and families themselves. This research does not use funds allocated for disaster relief funds for salmon fishermen.

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