

Columbia Steelhead Returns Plummet, Yet Gillnets Remain

For the third year straight, upriver summer steelhead returns to the Columbia River have been downgraded to near record low numbers. In 2018, the run was initially projected at 190,000 fish over Bonneville dam but has since been downgraded twice to just 110,000 fish including some 96,500 upriver fish headed for the Snake River system. The numbers are lower than last year's return, and the wild component of the run is extremely poor. Those wild fish are listed as Threatened in the ESA, but that designation didn't stop fisheries managers from making some decisions that defy logic.

Following the run updates, fisheries managers closed the entire Columbia River from Buoy 10 to the Tri-Cities to sport harvest of steelhead citing warm water conditions and fear of missing conservation objectives. For some insane reason though, fisheries managers also allowed four days of non-selective gillnetting on the river below Bonneville. This is the same action that was taken last year, but with a few glaring differences.

Last year, the fall Chinook gillnet fishery, which occurs at night, was subject to onboard monitoring (something the gillnet fleet despises) and was closed down after hitting their quota of encounters with wild B-run steelhead. This year, there were no observers aboard the boats due to objections by the gillnet lobby. That begs the question: if there was nothing to hide, why not allow observers or even onboard monitoring cameras like the ones used in some Alaskan commercial fisheries?

In addition, WDFW and ODFW lowered the mortality rate by a third on steelhead encountered in gillnets based off a mixture of last year's limited observer data (which merely factored in if the fish was alive or not when it came over the roller) and studies on species other than summer steelhead caught in the Columbia gillnet fishery. Genius right? It gets worse! The near record low

run of steelhead in 2017 produced double the expected encounter rate of steelhead in gillnets according to the very same observer study. That occurred on a lower than expected catch of Chinook too.

So what does it all mean? Well, it means that gillnets do in fact catch more steelhead as bycatch than fisheries managers care to admit or account for. The decision to allow a gillnet fishery also displays a genuine lack care for the conservation of steelhead by our fisheries managers. If they are so concerned about the steelhead run that they close selective recreational fisheries to steelhead angling, why would you allow gillnets to go in? Lunacy indeed reigns supreme when it comes to Columbia River fisheries management. Here's to hoping a few selected Fish & Wildlife Commissioners are shown the door and fisheries managers implement the common-sense reforms that were passed just six years ago.

Gillnet Bycatch Issues Spur Action in California

This past month, S. 2773, the Driftnet Modernization and Bycatch Reduction Act, was passed by its Senate committee, signaling more movement in the fight to ban drift gillnets in the California swordfish fishery. The bipartisan Senate legislation comes on the heels of a similar bill that passed in the California state legislature this summer.

Much like the intent of the Columbia River Gillnet Reform Policy of 2013, the plan is to phase out gillnets in this offshore fishery due to high rates of bycatch of threatened and endangered species. Sound familiar? While this legislation wouldn't apply to the Columbia River, it is heartening to see more change for the betterment of the resource. But it begs the question, why do we allow indiscriminate gillnets to fish over ESA listed fish in the Columbia and in other bays on the Washington coast?



FLUOROCARBON OR MONO Does it Really Matter?

When it comes to leader material, how much a difference does fluorocarbon make? And is it that much superior over high-quality monofilament line? Certainly, the price would suggest that. These are questions that many anglers have likely asked themselves. To best answer that question, let's look at the characteristics between the two materials.

Fluorocarbon:

- Higher stiffness and abrasion resistance than mono.
- Slightly less visible in the water.
- Less stretch.
- Typically, lower diameter to test pound strength.

Monofilament:

- Softer material better suited to tying knots.
- More stretch, which can be a good thing when it comes to absorbing shock during the hookup and while fighting fish.
- Costs three to four times less in price versus fluorocarbon.
- Floats better than fluorocarbon.

Fluorocarbon certainly has its place. If you're fishing around submerged structure, in crystal clear water, or you just want a line that will last longer, then use fluorocarbon. But for a lot of anglers, paying more for fluorocarbon isn't that necessary.

A good, quality monofilament knots better, making tying up drift rigs quicker and easier. There's also less breakage when using mono tied leaders. Recent strength break test videos available online have also shown mono to be equal to, and even greater, than some brands of fluorocarbon.

The stretch factor of a monofilament leader is hard to ignore, especially when it's used as a bumper in tandem with braided mainline. If you want a line with less stretch, a thinner diameter, and superior breaking strength, then reach for a braided mainline.

Anglers are, to say the least, a superstitious bunch and if anyone swears by a certain line, they should stick with it. But at the end of the day, you'll find that the advantages lean toward mono. And lest we not forget, mono never stopped the many generations of anglers before from catching fish. TYLER COMEAU