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Early research shows net pen salmon have the right stuff

Bonneville Power Administration

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ASTORIA, Ore. — A special group of net pen-raised salmon that just returned from the sea last fall are proving they are more than little fish in a big pond. Of approximately 600,000 salmon released, the 29,900-plus returning fish are posting strong overall survival rates and are playing a key role in boosting commercial harvests in the Columbia River Basin, according to preliminary findings just released from a Bonneville Power Administration-funded research project.

Early findings from this on-going study indicate these returning net pen salmon represent 42 percent of the 1996 commercial harvest from the lower Columbia River. The fish were originally reared and released just a year and a half ago from four net pen sites near the mouth of the Columbia. These sites are commonly known as Youngs Bay, Tongue Point, Blind Slough, and Deep River.

The BPA study, which was based on 12,630 of the total returning net pen fish, also finds that the survival rates for these salmon appear to be higher than those for traditional hatchery runs. The net pen fish in this study posted a nearly three percent overall survival rate (the percentage is figured on the number of adults that return versus the number of smolts released). In contrast, the total survival rate for all Columbia River coho in 1996 was less than one percent, which includes all net pen and traditional hatchery production.

“We’re very optimistic about these initial findings, and what the implications might be,” said Paul Hirose, terminal fishery project leader for the [Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife](#). “Even though we normally like to base our findings off of three or more years of data, from what we see now, the future looks really promising.”

The net pen fish in this study are identified from other salmon stocks thanks to a clipped adipose fin indicator and a small, coded-wire tag that’s inserted into the snout of the fish while they are juveniles. Over time, the fish included in this study are expected to reveal other important information about how to further streamline and boost production from net pen operations.

“Those resulting benefits can then be applied to other existing and potential terminal fishery sites throughout the Northwest,” said Jim Hill, fisheries project director for the Clatsop County Economic Development Council, which oversees and operates the lower Columbia River net pen program in

Oregon.

BPA funds this net pens research project as part of its region-wide effort to mitigate for the loss of wildlife habitat and fish runs from the construction of hydroelectric projects in the Columbia River. BPA spends \$252 million annually for fish and wildlife mitigation programs in the Northwest.

“This is the kind of project we encourage,” said Alexandra Smith, vice president of the environment, fish, & wildlife group at BPA. “Net pens are producing promising results and are helping to sustain an economically viable fishery in the Columbia estuary. I’m pleased that we’re getting a good return on our investment in this project.”

The federal agency also invests an additional \$90-280 million per year — depending on water conditions and power markets — in programs that enhance the Pacific Northwest’s environment, fish and wildlife. A portion of this money is forgone revenues while a portion is from power purchases.

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