

# Tribe opens gill-netting season on local rivers

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By Eric Barker of the Tribune

For a fourth consecutive year, the Nez Perce Tribe has opened commercial gill-net fishing on the Snake and Clearwater Rivers.

Joe Oatman, of the tribe's Department of Fisheries Resources said the tribe has worked with fisheries managers from neighboring states, as well as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, in developing the season intended to increase the tribal share of steelhead harvest in the Snake River and its tributaries.

"In time the tribe hopes to gradually build its capacity to catch its share of the steelhead fishery harvest," he said in an e-mail. "This fishery has been coordinated closely with the states and NOAA fisheries. The other fishery agencies have, and continue to, support this type of approach."

By court precedent, the number of hatchery salmon and steelhead not needed for spawning at hatcheries is split evenly between tribal fishermen and sport anglers licensed under Northwest states. But for decades, the tribe has not been able to come close to catching its share of the steelhead run through traditional fishing methods such as dip nets, gaffing and hook and line. Four years ago, in an attempt to ramp up the tribe's utilization of its share, the tribe authorized its commercial fishermen to use gill nets.

Each year during that time frame, the season has been opened earlier and earlier. For example, during the first few years of the fishery, the seasons were opened during the winter and only a handful of steelhead were caught. Last year the season opened in October and the harvest of steelhead increased. Tribal fishermen also caught coho salmon last year.

Oatman said the harvest of both steelhead and fall chinook by the use of gill nets has been light to date. He estimated that 12 adult hatchery steelhead, 18 adult fall chinook, including 14 hatchery fish and two wild fish, and two jack chinook had been caught in gill nets through Tuesday.

According to the rules of the fishing season, only tribal members who have obtained a commercial fishing permit from the tribe may use gill nets or other traditional methods that can catch fish in large volumes. The tribe is also requiring commercial anglers to report the number and species of fish they catch on a weekly basis.