

SB 1509 A STAFF MEASURE SUMMARY

House Committee On Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water

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Meeting Dates: 2/27

WHAT THE MEASURE DOES:

The measure eliminates the lottery for Columbia River gillnet vessel permits and reaffirms that no new vessel permits may be issued in the absence of the lottery. The measure also requires the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to convene a work group to develop recommendations related to a voluntary Columbia River gillnet vessel permit buyback program; establishes the work group membership, charge, and mandate for consistency with tribal rights and agreements; and directs ODFW to report on work group recommendations to a natural resources-related legislative committee by November 15, 2024. The measure declares an emergency and is effective on passage.

FISCAL: Has minimal fiscal impact

REVENUE: No revenue impact

SENATE VOTE: Ayes, 29; Nays, 1

ISSUES DISCUSSED:

EFFECT OF AMENDMENT:

No amendment.

BACKGROUND:

Gillnetting is a fishing method that uses a wall of netting that is vertically suspended by floats along the top of the water and weights along the bottom. Mesh sizes are designed to allow fish to only fit their heads through the netting, and then their gills typically get caught in the mesh as the fish try to back out of the net.

Commercial and tribal gillnetters catch shad, smelt, sturgeon, and salmon on the Columbia River. Oregon and Washington work in partnership under the Columbia River Interstate Compact to set fishing seasons and coordinate regulations on the lower Columbia River.

In Oregon, gillnet vessels must obtain a vessel permit to legally operate in the Columbia River gillnet salmon fishery. Vessel permits carry an annual fee and permits can be transferable. Currently, no new vessel permits may be issued in Oregon with the exception of those issued through a state lottery system. If the total number of permits renewed for the upcoming calendar year falls below 200, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife issues permits by a lottery system to return to a maximum of 200 total vessel permits in the state. In Washington, gillnet vessels must obtain a vessel license for an annual fee in order to operate. In 2022, the Washington Legislature enacted a voluntary buyback program to reduce commercial licenses in the state.

In the first program phase, inactive and active license holders were eligible to receive specified amounts of buyback compensation. In the second program phase, license holders set their own prices with specified maximums in a reverse auction. Prior to the program, there were 240 commercial Columbia River salmon gillnet fishing licenses. After the program concluded in June 2023, 67 Washington licenses remained.