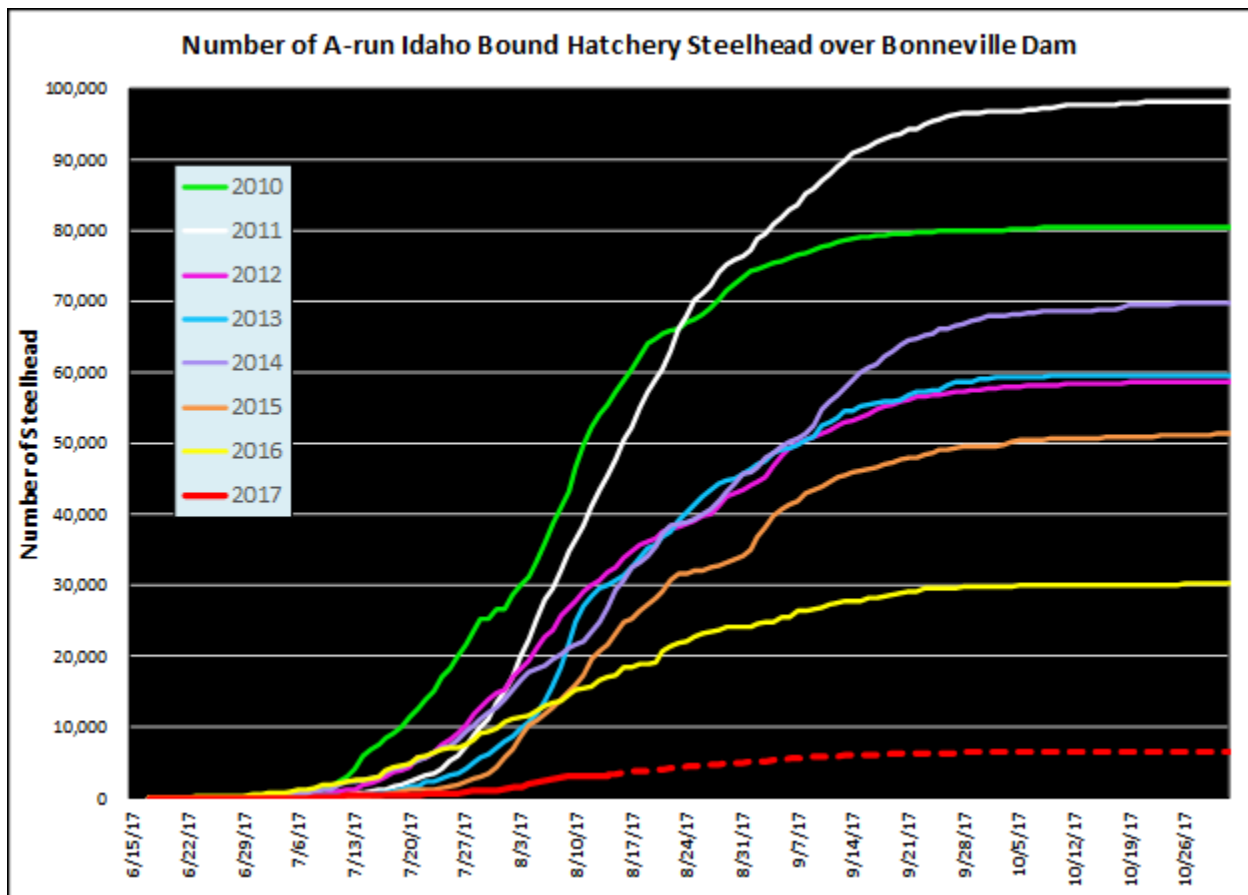


Changes in Idaho's Steelhead Rules

Hi everybody.

I know many of you recognize that this year's steelhead run is not looking very good, and many have been asking me if we will be changing Idaho's steelhead fishing rules because of it. Well, we have finally got to the point where we can make an informed estimate of how many steelhead will be returning to Idaho, and it isn't looking pretty. Typically, by this date, close to half the A-run hatchery steelhead that are returning to Idaho will have passed over Bonneville Dam. If you expand what we have seen to date out to the entire run, we get an estimate of about 6,600 A-run Idaho bound hatchery fish will pass over Bonneville Dam. If you are wondering how this compare to the past, take a look at the graph below. The solid red line shows where we are today and the dashed portion of the line is what we are forecasting out for the future. As you can see, this is a fraction of what we have seen in recent years. It is important for me to emphasize that these are estimates for only the A-run, which return earlier than the B-run fish. These A-run fish are destined for the Snake River and Salmon River drainage, but provide fishing opportunity throughout Idaho.



Now that we have an estimate of what the A-run returning to Idaho is looking like, the obvious question is, "what are we going to do about it". Here are the things we considered. If 6,600 Idaho bound fish pass over Bonneville Dam, typically about 70% of them will eventually make it to Idaho. If that is the case this year, that would leave us with a 4,620 fish. To fill our hatcheries (for the A-run), we need about 2,680 fish for brood stock. On top of that, not all the hatchery fish that make it to Idaho

return to a place where they can be trapped and used for brood stock. That means a harvest of just 1,500 fish could start cutting into our hatchery brood needs. I can tell you that it is not unusual for anglers to harvest more than half the hatchery fish that make it to Idaho. As such, we need to restrict harvest to insure we keep our hatcheries full. After a lot of deliberation, we decided the best thing to do was to only allow catch-and-release fishing opportunities for steelhead (no harvest allowed) for the entire state of Idaho. This rule will go into effect on August 18 and will continue through December 31, 2017. We will continue to monitor the returns; and if numbers look good for a particular reach of river, we can provide harvest opportunities there. I will keep you up to speed as we learn more.

As I emphasized earlier, the estimates I provided are only for the A-run. Hatchery steelhead destined for the Clearwater River, as well as a couple smaller runs up the Salmon River, are B-run fish. These fish return later than the A-run fish; and as a result, we don't have a good in-season forecast for them yet. Based on historic run timing, only about 4% of the B-run should have passed over Bonneville Dam by now. By mid-September, half of Idaho's hatchery B-run should have passed over Bonneville Dam at which time we will determine whether different rules are more appropriate for the Clearwater basin. Hopefully, this run will be large enough to provide some harvest opportunity, but you should all know that we are expecting a very poor B-run of fish as well.

I know many of you are concerned about the wild run of steelhead and impacts that our fisheries could have on them. Indeed the wild run of steelhead is not looking good either. It doesn't appear to be down as much as the hatchery run, but we haven't seen this few of wild steelhead pass Bonneville Dam since the mid 1990's. In Idaho, we operate our sport fisheries to have about a 3% impact on wild fish. In years like this when fishing rules for hatchery fish are very restrictive, fishing effort will be extremely light. As a result, we expect that impacts from sport fisheries on wild fish will fall well short of 3%. I should also mention that when we calculate the impacts our fisheries have on wild fish, we are very conservative. In other words, when we say our sport fisheries impacted 3% of the wild run, we know it is less than that.

I'm sorry I had to be the bearer of bad news, especially since it seems like we have been doing a lot of this lately. As I indicated earlier, I will keep you all informed as we learn more, and if we find situations where we can safely provide harvest opportunities, I will let you know.

Take Care

Joe DuPont
Clearwater Region's Fisheries Manager
Lewiston, Idaho
208-799-5010