

Demery - your file

Changing Minimum Commercial Size Limit on Razor Clams

Problem

Mrs. Harriet Snell requested that the Commission reduce the commercial size limit for razor clams from 4-1/4 to 3-1/2 inches. A meeting in Seaside with 11 commercial diggers and dealers on July 24, 1972 resulted in a request for a 4-inch minimum size limit.

Background

Prior to 1954, the minimum commercial size limit was 3-1/2 inches. This was increased to 4-1/4 inches in 1954. The commercial fishery peaked in 1950-52 with 700-800 diggers taking about 50% of the total harvest. A decline in numbers and per cent of total harvest begun in 1953, increased in 1954 when the larger size limit discouraged a great number of diggers and eliminated a size of clam important in the fishery. In 1971, only 6% of the total harvest was taken by 130 commercial diggers.

Commercial landings in 1972 should be about 75,000 clams which will continue the low level of the last three years. About 75 diggers participated. Personal use catches were also low. The level of catches, though down, did not fall below those observed in the early 1960's, which suggest a return to higher abundance soon.

Discussion

The rationale for the 4-1/4-inch size limit was to increase the per cent yield of meat from razor clams taken by commercial diggers. With the 3-1/2-inch size limit, about 50% of the commercial harvest was clams in their early second year of life. These clams, which were nearly eliminated from the fishery by the 4-1/4-inch size limit, grow rapidly through their second year of life. A 3-1/2-inch clam in January of a given year will grow to 4-1/4 inches by June of that year. More important still, is that a 3-1/2-inch clam will average 40 grams in weight, while a 4-1/4-inch clam will average 80 grams.

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So, in five months, a 3-1/2-inch clam will increase in length by 10%, but in weight by 100%. Catch records show that the peak of the commercial harvest occurs in May and June after the clams have matured, had a chance to spawn, and achieved most of their growth.

The increased size limit created problems concerning management of the resource and economics of the fishery. Several hundred commercial diggers were required to sort the 3-1/2 to 4-1/4-inch clams from their digging efforts. Few diggers can distinguish between the "shows" of 3-1/2-inch clams and 4-1/4-inch clams. Most of the undersized clams were discarded onto the beach or into the water, with little effort on the part of the diggers to replace the clam back into the sand. Ten years of observations by a staff biologist convinced him that most of these discarded clams die. In 1966, an estimated 90,000 clams were discarded by commercial diggers.

The second problem, an economic one, was the loss of the size of clam most desired by the restaurant trade and which brought the highest price to the digger.

Neither of these problems had a significant effect on the clam stocks, but discarding razor clams results in wastage and is not a wise use of the resource.

To reduce the size limit to 3-1/2 inches would increase the commercial harvest by making more clams available to the fishery and enticing more diggers to participate. The potential for a major commercial fishery would then exist, and the problem of poor utilization of clam stocks would return. Perhaps more important is the possibility that the sport diggers would react with a move to ban all commercial digging.

The 4-inch clam was preferred by the majority of the diggers at the July 24 meeting at Seaside. This size limit would save a portion of the 3-1/2 to
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4-1/4-inch clams now discarded and possibly lost, but would reduce the yield from the clams by 25% (80 grams to 60). It would provide the smaller sized clam desired by the restaurant trade. The total catch (both fisheries combined) would be redistributed but increased slightly, if at all.

Recommendation

The staff recommends the 4-1/4-inch size limit be retained. It is biologically justifiable. However, the 4-inch minimum size has merit that the commission may wish to consider.

Fish Commission of Oregon
Management & Research Division
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