May 29, 2014

Miranda Wecker, Chair  
Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission  
600 Capitol Way North  
Olympia, WA 98501-1091

RE: Proposed Rule Changes to Surf Smelt Recreational and Commercial Fisheries

Dear Chair Wecker and Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) commercial and recreational fishing regulations for surf smelt in Puget Sound. This letter is supplemental to our April 11 comment letter; it contains additional information about Audubon’s marine bird initiative and includes the direct support of eleven Audubon chapters.

For the record, we find all presented alternatives to be inadequate given the lack of scientific data on Puget Sound forage fish populations. Noting this, of the range of options provided, we support Option 3: End commercial harvests in Puget Sound and reduce the recreational harvest of smelt.

Audubon Washington is an organization dedicated to the protection of birds and their habitats. We have 25 active chapters here in Washington, representing over 21,000 members. We also have three science and nature centers located in Seattle, Sequim and Tacoma that serve over 35,000 people each year, making us uniquely positioned to help educate people about the importance of forage fish within the marine ecosystem.

The protection and recovery of our west coast forage fish populations is a high priority for Audubon throughout the Pacific Flyway. It is our first flyway-wide initiative, involving state Audubon programs and chapters from Alaska, Washington, Oregon and California. Birds do best when they have enough to eat and places to live. Audubon’s emerging marine bird initiative is focused on exactly that: ensuring adequate food supplies during all stages of their life journey.

Forage fish of the California Current and associated inland waters are the subject of widespread conservation concern\(^1\). Marine bird populations in Washington, Oregon, California and Alaska have decreased dramatically in recent decades, requiring us to focus our efforts on protecting the bird species that rely on the rich food resources that thrive in our dynamic marine environment. Forage fish are the cornerstone of the marine food ecosystem, providing an energy-rich food source essential for the survival of larger fish, marine mammals and many species of birds.

The forage group faces a wide array of threats, ranging from increasing global harvest pressure, to changes in the marine environment associated with climate change, pollution, invasive species, and

spawning habitat degradation. As such, Audubon supports fisheries policies and management that recognize the value of forage fish in the marine ecosystem and that take a precautionary approach to setting harvest limits and approving new fisheries. Audubon also recognizes and values the social, cultural and economic benefits of the local surf smelt fishery. Although our state forage fish management plan\(^2\) and policies (POL-C3012) appear to represent these values, we lack the basic information that would allow us to ensure a sustainable fishery and adequate prey base for future generations. None of the three options offered do anything to improve our lack of knowledge about the health of surf smelt populations in Puget Sound.

The following points highlight our concerns about the current status of the surf smelt fishery and the three options offered by WDFW for modification:

1. There is no data available from which to estimate surf smelt population biomass in Puget Sound.
2. There is no data available from which to estimate the surf smelt recreational harvest.
3. It is not clear how the proposed changes in timing of access under Option 2 would result in a 40% reduction in harvest, as is stated in the Proposed Rulemaking CR-102. According to the WDFW surf smelt fishery map, there are currently five regionally distinct commercial fisheries zones, allowing approximately 1,188 cumulative days of access a year. Eliminating the Sunday catch would result in 1,011 days of access, an approximately 15% reduction in available fishing days (Table 1).
4. The information needed to objectively assess the impact of current harvest levels on the surf smelt population or their predators is not available.
5. There is no action proposed which will address any of the preceding information deficiencies.

The Salish Sea is an area of critical importance for marine birds within the Pacific Flyway. Seventy-two bird species are considered highly dependent on the marine and intertidal habitats of the Salish Sea and an additional 100 species depend on the marine and terrestrial habitats for some portion of their life history needs\(^3\). These birds rely on the food resources sustained by our fertile marine environment, particularly during the overwintering and migratory stop-over periods. Audubon is greatly concerned by the fact that our local wintering marine bird populations have declined significantly over the last 30 years\(^4\). While many naturally occurring and human-driven factors are potentially responsible for these trends, the diminished status and health of forage fish prey in our region are recognized to be of particular conservation concern.

A species-diverse prey base is critical to maintaining a healthy and resilient marine ecosystem. Because forage fish population abundance fluctuates widely in space and in time, the assessment of forage prey availability must encompass a range of conditions, including population abundance/biomass, variation in size classes, spawning timing, and geographic distribution. Given that information on these measures is often limited, an ecosystem-based approach to forage fish management must err on the side of caution. Predator diets are known to vary widely both within and between years and according to geographic location\(^1\). When predators are forced to switch to prey


items of lesser nutritional quality, however, we see negative consequences for their health, particularly when it comes to reproductive output\textsuperscript{5,6}.

**Limited information exists as to the direct importance of surf smelt in the diet of our resident and overwintering marine birds.** According to our review of the literature, locally breeding Rhinoceros Auklets (*Cerorhinca monocerata*)\textsuperscript{7,8,9,10} and Common Murre (*Uria aalge*)\textsuperscript{6,10} have both been documented feeding surf smelt to their chicks during the breeding season. Nonetheless, the prey requirements required to sustain our local marine bird populations are not well understood, making assessment of potential fisheries impacts difficult.

**A precautionary approach is required.** Our state forage fish management plan calls for a precautionary approach when information is limited and to reduce fishing or other activities if there is a reason to believe the activity will cause significant harm, *even if such a link has not been established by clear scientific evidence* (POL-C3012). Audubon recognizes the value of a healthy commercial and recreational surf smelt fishery to local businesses and residents alike. The lack of information regarding surf smelt stock status and harvest, however, indicates that we are essentially operating without the knowledge to make good decisions. Furthermore, not a single option presented by WDFW advances the department’s ability to address these issues. Given their ecological and economic function in supporting larger fish such as salmon, marine mammals and birds, and their relatively diminished abundance both within the Salish Sea and beyond, we must manage forage fish using the precautionary approach outlined in our state policy until there is evidence to the contrary.

While we appreciate the step forward that is represented in Option 3, we only endorse that option as an interim step to better informed management of the surf smelt fishery. The absence of scientific data on stock health and breeding success, along with required reporting of both recreational and commercial catch, makes it impossible to manage forage fish in a responsible manner for the benefit of the entire ecosystem. We encourage you to end commercial harvest of smelt in Puget Sound, reduce recreational harvest of smelt, and *most importantly, address the aforementioned information deficiencies as quickly as possible.*

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and for your past pro-active management of forage fish. We look forward to working with you on this important issue.


Sincerely,

Gail Gatton
Executive Director

Todd Burley, Chair
Audubon Washington
Chris Karrenberg, Conservation Chair
Seattle Audubon Society

Sam Merrill, Conservation Chair
Black Hills Audubon Society
Tim Manns, Conservation Chair
Skagit Audubon Society

Janine Schuett, President
Kitsap Audubon Society
Fran Haywood, President
Spokane Audubon Society

Pam Borso, President
North Cascades Audubon Society
Krystal Kyer, Executive Director
Tahoma Audubon Society

Mary Porter-Solberg, Conservation Chair
Olympic Peninsula Audubon Society
Randy Smith, President
Vashon Audubon Society

Kathleen Snyder, President
Pilchuck Audubon Society
Ann Casey, President
Whidbey Audubon Society

Table 1. Proposed changes to commercial surf smelt fishery under Option 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region/Season</th>
<th>Days open (current)</th>
<th>Days open under Sunday closure</th>
<th>Difference (days)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open entire year</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1 – April 15</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 1 – April 15</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>(28A, 28D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>October 1 – April 15</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>(26B, 26C, 28B, 28C, 28D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>November 1 – April 15</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(22B, 25A, 25E)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1188</strong></td>
<td><strong>1011</strong></td>
<td><strong>177</strong></td>
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