

New regulations displease some Oregon bass fishermen

GEORGE PLAVEN, East Oregonian 7:21 a.m. PDT September 8, 2015



(Photo: Special to the Statesman Journal)

PENDLETON, Ore. (AP) — Bud Hartman can sense 55 years of progress beginning to unravel.

As one of the original members of the Oregon Bass and Panfish Club in 1958, Hartman, of Portland, fought for the state's first ever bag limits on bass fishing to protect the species from overharvest.

The Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission last week approved sport fishing regulations for 2016 that includes removing bag limits on all warmwater fish — including bass, walleye, crappie, panfish and catfish — in the Columbia, John Day and Umpqua rivers, leaving Hartman deflated.

"I've been at the forefront of making sure these fish have the right to exist in Oregon," he said. "As of last Friday, I felt like all of these efforts we put in have all been in vain."

Hartman, who attended the commission's meeting in Seaside, said he felt his arguments against ending bag limits on warmwater fish fell on deaf ears. He isn't worried the fisheries will become overly degraded, but said it simply sends the wrong message to anglers.

"To me, it devalues the resource," Hartman said. "It says to the angling public that (these fish) don't mean anything."



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Eighteen percent of Oregon fishermen said they consider themselves primarily warmwater anglers, according to a 2006 survey by the state Department of Fish & Wildlife. Another 26 percent said they fished for warmwater species at some point during the past year.

When it comes to bass fishing, Oregon has become a world-class destination. Last year, Bassmaster Magazine ranked the Columbia River 14th in its list of top 100 places to fish for bass in the U.S., while Field & Stream Magazine also named the John Day River as the best smallmouth bass river in the West in its May 2015 issue.

Lonnie Johnson, conservation director for the Oregon Bass Angler Sportsman Society, or B.A.S.S., said most bass fishermen are catch-and-release only, removing bag limits might open the doors to a potential cottage industry.

"We're very concerned about what's the writing on the wall here," Johnson said.

ODFW has said the proposal is meant to lower the rate at which bass prey on native salmon and steelhead smolts, especially in the John Day River where rising water temperatures have lured smallmouth bass higher into the watershed.

But Steve Fleming, of Mah-Hah Outfitters in Fossil, cited an ODFW study from 1999 that concluded smallmouth bass are not major predators of spring chinook and steelhead smolts in the John Day, since the bass are not particularly active when smolts migrate in colder water.

On the other hand, northern pikeminnow prey on smolts year round, Fleming said, and bass have actually helped decrease pikeminnow numbers in the river.

"I just don't see the science supporting this decision-making," Fleming said.

Fleming, who has guided fishing trips on the John Day for 27 years, said the vote to remove bag limits on warmwater fish was thoughtless. He doesn't expect his business to suffer, though he said the fishery, along with rural communities, will all be impacted.

"The word will get out that you can't find anywhere to fish on the John Day unless you have a boat," he said. "The summer traffic will die down."

The new rules are part of an effort to simplify warmwater and trout fishing regulations statewide. Other changes adopted by the Fish & Wildlife Commission include eliminating the April trout opener and removing bag limits on non-native brown and brook trout in streams, with a few exceptions.

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