



Mark Ihander and Hunter Brady gillnet in Young's Bay.

Gillnetters dwindle away

On a warm April afternoon, Jason Lake and Mark Ihander were among about half a dozen other gillnetters fishing Young's Bay.

"There's nobody here. One time we had laid 21 boats in this spot right here, about 15 years ago. What do you have now, two or three? There used to be a lot of boats fishing in here," Ihander said.

"A lot of them went out of business. A lot of places also opened up like Tongue Point, South Channel and Blind Slough. They've been catching four or five fish per boat, which isn't a lot, but it's good for this year. You do your best and get what you get. Every day you do your best and try not to leave on unfriendly terms with the rest of the guys on the grounds."

As the clock reached 2 p.m., Lake spun the wheel of his gillnet boat and begun laying net a swooping "S" pattern. It takes about two minutes for Lake to deploy his net 250 fathoms, or 1,500 feet.

"You can't get it all out here," he said. "You swing and then pick, and get back in line and do it again. You try to time it right so you get a good set."

Gillnetters are careful not to set too deep, avoiding snags that can rip their nets.

"You don't want to go down there. There are some things that won't give you your lead line back," Ihander said, noting that the center of the channel drops to nearly 60 feet.

The sporadic gillnetting season started around Valentine's Day, but the fishing has been slow compared to previous years, Lake said. Chinook salmon and white sturgeon account for a majority of the catch, with the occasional sockeye.

Ihander used to gillnet all over, but now largely sticks to Young's Bay, where young salmon are reared in net pens. Imprinted on the bay, they return as adults, specifically intended for commercial catch.

"I used to try to hit them all [the net-pen fisheries] and race from one place to the other from Tongue Point to Blind Slough to Deep River. I used to fish the hell out of Deep River when they first opened it up. I got older, settled on one spot and called it good," he said. "We tie up here and lay out there. We don't burn any fuel."

A five-gallon gas jug can last a few days of fishing, if tides and fishing conditions are ideal.

Gillnetting can be an entry to commercial fishing for some, but gear and permits costs can quickly mount.

Lake estimated he has invested more than \$225,000 in his current setup.

"And I doubt I could sell the whole thing for \$20,000," he said. "It's only worth something to some other fishermen," Ihander added.

"And how many young guys are there left that are interested in buying? There's nobody."



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