KATIE WILSON — EO Media Group

A normally staid science conference in north Long Beach was the scene of picketing Saturday to protest proposed cuts in Willapa Bay salmon gillnetting. Pacific County commercial fishermen are angry at the prospect of losing more fishing opportunity in light of recent steps by Washington and Oregon to move them off the Columbia River's mainstem.

Willapa worries

Fishers protest salmon-harvest cutback in bay

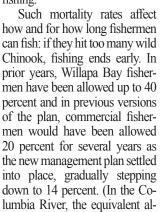
By KATIE WILSON EO Media Group

LONG BEACH, Wash. — More than 30 commercial fishermen and seafood processors picketed outside the annual Pacific County Marine Resource Committee Science Conference at the Cranberry Museum in Long Beach May 16, protesting a draft management policy they say could end commercial salmon fishing on Willapa Bay.

The woman they believe is behind the policy, former Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission member Miranda Wecker, spoke at the conference, talking about lessons she's learned working with state agencies in Willapa Bay over the past 23 years.

Though Wecker stepped down as chair of the Fish and Wildlife Commission earlier this year, she remains an influential member. At a commission meeting in April, she made a motion to amend an interim policy to

guide salmon fishing operations for this year as a draft management plan goes out for public comment. She moved to further reduce from 20 percent to 14 percent the proportion of naturany Spawning Chinook commercial fishermen are allowed to accidentally kill in the regular course of fishing.



Another step too far?

lowable impact is 2 percent.)

That same 14 percent is included among the options suggested in the draft management plan currently out for public comment. If it goes forward, the fisherman gathered on May 16 say the gillnet fishery that operates on Willapa Bay is over

"It makes it almost unviable to do as a real job," said Ron Cary Jr., a fourth-generation fisherman based out of Nahcotta. He and his brother run a gillnet boat in the bay. "It might pay for itself if you do it, but you're not going to make enough to go anywhere with it."

Most of the gillnetters who work Willapa also fish elsewhere. Many are crabbers. Still, Willapa Bay does represent significant income and history to the people who fish there. Shifting to other fisheries or other locations will be difficult, fishermen said.

"In the Columbia (River), there's still some openers and some off sites, but the Willapa Bay is where I've always fished," Cary said. "I'd have to change pretty much everything I do."

A plan by former Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber has restricted gillnet operations on the main stem of the Columbia River while a management plan in Grays Harbor has made gillnet fishing permits there "worthless," fishermen say.

"We will not be able to sustain a fishery on the days that we get," said Andy Mitby, a commercial fisherman and a member of the Willapa Bay Ad Hoc Salmon Advisory Committee, whose members, a mix of conservationists, recreational fishermen and commercial fishermen, are appointed by the state. "They have removed us from the Columbia, drastically cut back seasons on the Columbia, removed us from Grays Harbor, Puget Sound. So we were told by the commission that the Willapa would be the last place we could hang our hat and now they're taking that from us."

"This," he said, "will be a nail in the coffin."

Managing the Willapa

On the surface, Willapa Bay appears simple: there are no tribal fisheries that need to be included in any seasonal management plans, there are no federally protected salmon species and while recreational fishing opportunities do exist, it is a smaller fishery all around.

Since 2010, recreational and commercial salmon fisheries in the bay and its associated rivers

have been managed under a draft plan. Then a lawsuit was brought against the state by the nonprofit Twin Harbors Fish and Wildlife Advocacy alleging mismanagement of commercial and recreational salmon fisheries in the bay. This lawsuit resulted in a settle-

ment in 2014 that re-

quired the Washington Fish and Wildlife Department to develop and adopt management plans for Willapa Bay and Grays Harbor.

Miranda Wecker

The Grays Harbor plan went through earlier this year. According to commercial fishermen, it is so stringent it has all but forced them off the water there. They are afraid the same thing will happen in Willapa Bay.

On May 16, when Wecker gave her speech, the protesters crowded inside the Cranberry Museum and propped one of their signs against a chair in the back, its message facing Wecker: "Miranda Wecker: The truth will set you free! Gillnetters fish for the people that don't sport fish!"

Though she touched on Willapa Bay salmon fishing briefly in her speech, the subject mostly arose during the following question-and-answer period.

She warned them that though there are no salmon on the Willapa listed under the Endangered Species Act, such a change is possible if WDFW can't meet its conservation goals, goals it hopes to meet by restricting harvest. If salmon species became listed under the ESA, that could change everything for everybody: recreational and commercial fishermen, shellfish growers and harvesters, and other industries that make their living on the shores or waters of Willapa Bay.

It is a concept the fishermen and processors present disputed. They had yet to hear anyone from the state or federal fishery management suggest such a designation is possible, they said. The fish returning to the Willapa are hatchery fish, they said. Of those, some return to the hatcheries to spawn, others stray and spawn on their own and don't return to a hatchery — these "natural fish" are still hatchery fish, though, fishermen argued, not wild.

"I do believe it is not wise to assume we will never have ESA

DRAFT PLAN

The draft salmon management policy includes five alternatives for management of salmon fisheries on Willapa Bay. The commission plans to hold a public hearing on the policy and is expected to take action on it at a meeting on June 13 in Olympia.

To view the draft policy, visit tinyurl.com/WillapaPlan. Written comments may be submitted via e-mail to willapabay@dfw. wa.gov or by mail to Steve Thiesfeld, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, 600 Capitol Way N., Olympia, WA 98501.

listing here," Wecker said in an interview later that day.

More than fishermen

Fishermen worry that if hatchery production of fish is diminished — as has been suggested in certain options listed in the draft management plan fish runs on the bay will die out or take decades, even upwards of 100 years, to hit brood stock management standards and spawning goals set out by WDFW. The department and the Fish and Wildlife Commission, however, believe these goals will be met within 16 to 21 years under the 14 percent options. In the meantime, the plan could affect more than fishermen.

Dean Antich, general manager of South Bend Products, a salm-on-processing facility in South Bend, said he was out picketing with the fishermen because their gillnet operations mean jobs in the community — specifically, jobs at South Bend Products' buying and processing centers.

"Our business is ever-reli-

ant on gillnet fishing in Willapa Bay," he said. The reduction to 14 percent would mean he employs fewer people later this summer and fall. "It would eliminate 30 jobs from August, September, October."

For similar reasons, close to

a dozen employees from Bornstein Seafoods in Astoria were also present.

It's not something Antich feels the Fish and Wildlife Commission has considered.

Pacific County Commissioners Steve Rogers and Lisa Ayers attended the conference and went outside to meet with protesters before the talks began inside. As cars drove in to park behind the Cranberry Museum and fishermen hoisted their signs, Rogers assured them that they were "preaching to the choir."

Wahkiakum County Commissioner Mike Backman was also present, standing farther down the road from the main group but also holding a sign. He is in his third year as a commissioner but also has commercially fished in Bristol Bay, Alaska, and on the Columbia River. He works as a wholesale buyer as well, selling to South Bend Products.

He wanted the Fish and Wildlife Commission and the community to think about the wider economic context of limiting commercial salmon harvest on Willapa Bay. Recreational fishing brings some money to communities, he said, but not like commercial fishing.

"Now when we go fishing, we go out and then we make money and then we spend that money," he said. "That money gets put into the system. ... They look at us, they see only a handful of us. But we represent every restaurant, every store. You know you get a fish in Safeway, it comes from somebody like us ... This food doesn't just materialize inside of grocery stores."

