

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5166

As of February 2, 2015

Title: An act relating to the management of forage fish resources.

Brief Description: Concerning the management of forage fish resources.

Sponsors: Senators Rolfes, Ranker and Hasegawa.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Natural Resources & Parks: 1/21/15.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Staff: Bonnie Kim (786-7316)

Background: The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), among other duties, must protect and manage fish and wildlife by establishing the time, place, manner, and methods used to harvest or enjoy fish and wildlife. Generally a recreational license is required to hunt, fish, or take wildlife or seaweed. A recreational fishing or shellfish license is not required, however, for carp, smelt, and crawfish, and a hunting license is not required for bullfrogs.

WDFW describes forage fish as a variety of small schooling fish that serve as food for many species of fish, birds, and marine mammals. Several forage fish species are fished recreationally and commercially in Washington. Forage fish species present in state waters include the northern anchovy, pacific sand lance – also known as candlefish, pacific herring, pacific sardine, and a variety of smelt species.

Summary of Bill: A recreational fishing license is required to take smelt. WDFW and the Department of Natural Resources must collaborate to conduct a survey of surf smelt and sand lance spawning grounds throughout the Puget Sound, including the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The habitat survey must be completed and accessible by the public by June 30, 2017. To the extent possible, the survey should be conducted using veterans conservation corps crews.

Also by June 30, 2017, WDFW must conduct a mid-water trawl survey throughout the Puget Sound to evaluate the prevalence of adults of all species of forage fish. WDFW must integrate survey results into existing Puget Sound ecosystem assessments to assist in managing and conserving forage fish species and the species that prey on them.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: Science almost always indicates that the decline of forage fish is a major cause in the decline of marine mammal populations and damages the ecosystem. The protection and recovery of forage fish is a top priority for Audubon Washington because they provide an energy-rich food source for larger fish and marine birds, and bird populations are in decline. There is a large decline in fish populations but we lack data the surveys would provide to understand the reasons for the decline. WDFW does not currently have a method to keep track of smelt fisheries. The habitat survey began in 2012 for the south Sound. The mid-water trawl survey would supply important data related to WDFW's fishery management plan. Forage fish spawn near beaches and the surveys would allow for planning coastal conservation efforts for the biggest impact. DNR and WDFW have previously conducted beach spawning surveys through the Puget Sound Veterans Corps. DNR would support an amendment granting flexibility to hire veterans through either the Puget Sound Veteran's Corps or the Veterans Conservation Corps. The surveys would provide critical information on forage fish populations in the Puget Sound. Understanding forage fish populations and spawning is key to understanding current pressures. The mid-water trawl survey should be funded adequately for dedicated ship time, skilled staff, and much effort.

OTHER: The new license requirement to take smelt is agreeable because most anglers already have a recreational fishing license. The mid-water trawl survey should be extended to the Columbia River. Any funds expended for the surveys should be used for stock evaluation.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Rolfes, prime sponsor; Trina Bayard, Audubon WA; Bruce Wishart, Sound Action; Dayv Lowry, Timothy Quinn, WDFW; Kyle Murphy, DNR; Jeff Parsons, Puget Sound Partnership.

OTHER: Scott Sigmon, Coastal Conservation Assn.; Carl Burke, Fish NW, NW Sportsfishing Industry Assn., Puget Sound Anglers.