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Hello Sublette County, this is Albert Sommers reporting to you from interim meetings of the Wyoming Legislature. Even though we are past fishing season, I would like to report on my efforts regarding guided/commercial fishing boats. Over the last ten years, Sublette County has seen an exponential increase, or so it seems, in the number of guided fishing boat trips on the Green and New Fork rivers. A reliable source told me a couple of years ago that one day he counted over twenty boat trailers at the New Fork access by the Boulder Bridge. I have been contacted by both the fishing public and by Sublette County fishing guides with concerns about overuse of the rivers. These fishermen believe the increased use has resulted in decreased fishing quality and experience. This increased pressure on Sublette County rivers is the result of a resurgence in the sport of fly fishing worldwide. It is easy to see where this increased pressure comes from when you look at the over four million people now traveling through Jackson Hole, coupled with the booming metropolitan areas of Denver and Salt Lake City in our neighboring states. In the past, the Green and New Fork rivers were off the grid, and nobody really knew about the high quality of fishing on these wonderful rivers, but 24-hour TV programming and social media have uncovered our little secret. This phenomenon of increasing guided boat fishing is not just an issue in Sublette County. I have heard similar concerns about the Platte, Big Horn, Snake, Salt and Shoshone rivers.

Our neighboring states of Montana, Idaho, and Colorado have seen high usage on their rivers for decades. The fishing pressure in these states has resulted in each of them regulating guided/commercial fishing boats in one manner or another. All three states require fishing guides to be licensed, and Montana and Idaho regulate the number of guided boats on certain stretches of rivers. In Wyoming, hunting guides are regulated through the Wyoming State Board of Outfitters and Professional Guides, which is primarily composed of hunting outfitters. In general, Wyomingites do not like a lot of regulation, so regulation of fishing guides will not occur until the industry asks for regulations or the public becomes concerned enough to push legislators to act.

There is some regulation of commercial fishing in Wyoming, but it varies between accesses on National Forest, BLM, and Wyoming State lands. The Forest Service and BLM issue permits and restrict number of use days or boats per day on certain stretches of river during certain periods. Wyoming requires a guide to buy a permit to guide on state land, but does not restrict numbers or do any enforcement. Enforcement seems to be a major issue. Federal land management agencies are increasingly strapped to put resources on the ground, and that means enforcement has been sporadic. Guides who own these federal or state permits are concerned about the number of unpermitted guides utilizing the rivers. Much of Sublette County's water is unregulated outside Forest Service and BLM land, which means it is a free-for-all. Montana and Idaho have MOUs with the federal land management agencies regarding enforcement and permitting. This gives these states a more cohesive system. The Snake River is highly regulated through the National Park Service, the Forest Service, and Teton County, which creates an overflow of users to the Green, New Fork, and Salt rivers. Further, the Snake remains high and unfishable longer than the Green and New Fork rivers, which puts yet more pressure on our unregulated waters.

Over the last two years, culminating in three nights in a row in September, I have met with fishing guides looking for a solution. Our local guides seem to want commercial fishing boat guides to be licensed through an outfitter board, similar to hunting guides, but with the authority to regulate number of boats. This is more or less self-regulation. Fishing guides in Jackson are more resistant to a licensing process, as most of them already pay for permits from the Feds, but they also recognize that the pressure on Wyoming rivers is likely going to continue to increase, which will result in a decline in fishing quality.

Importantly, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) has clearly stated that the number of fish and the size of fish in Sublette County rivers has not been negatively affected. Increasing numbers of fishermen may not be a biological concern right now, but it is certainly a social concern. It is safe to say that nearly every guide I talked to recognized there is an issue with overcrowding or enforcement of existing permits, and that these problems will only get worse.

At the end of the last legislative session in March of 2019, I drafted a bill that would license fishing guides and give the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission the authority to regulate commercially-guided fishing boats in Wyoming. I did not advance the bill, but used it to get the issue of regulating commercially-guided fishing boats on the interim study list with the Travel, Recreation, and Wildlife (TRW) Committee. After visiting with numerous guides in western Wyoming, I decided this issue could be resolved only through the creation of a task force composed primarily of fishing guides, and staffed by the WGFD.

On October 2 and 3, the TRW Committee met in Dubois, and on October 2 the Committee debated the fishing guide issue. I presented a bill for the committee's consideration that would create a task force. The TRW Committee voted to approve the bill, and now it will be brought to the entire Legislature for consideration as a committee bill. Committee bills have a much higher rate of success during legislative sessions than individual bills, because they have been more thoroughly debated by members of both the House and the Senate. I hope the task force will be approved, and I hope we can find some solutions to protect our great fishery in Sublette County.

I can be reached at albert@albertsommers.com with comments or concerns.