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Council opts for limits on wild salmon catch

'No fishing' option thrown back -- final ruling expected by May

- [Glen Martin, Chronicle Environment Writer](#)

Friday, April 7, 2006



Sacramento -- After hearing tearful testimony from commercial fishermen who warned of bankruptcy, the Pacific Fishery Management Council recommended a greatly restricted Pacific Coast salmon season Thursday -- foreclosing the much-dreaded "no fishing" option that had been under consideration.

Still, commercial fishing would be completely banned in southern Oregon and extreme Northern California.

From Point Arena to Pigeon Point -- which includes the Bay Area -- commercial fishing would be allowed July 26-31, all of August and all of September. Fishing would also be allowed from Point Reyes to Point San Pedro -- just north of San Francisco -- for 10 days in October. In the Monterey region, commercial trollers would be able to fish all of May, the last six days of July and all of August and September.

Given that the commercial season typically runs from May through September, the recommended restrictions on the current season are draconian. The strictures are intended to protect salmon runs on the Klamath River, which are at low ebb.

The recommendation will be passed on to the U.S. secretary of commerce, who is expected to make a final decision on the season by the end of the month.

Commercial fishermen from California and Oregon were angered by the recommendation, predicting economic losses up to \$150 million.

"I think there's a very good chance I could go out of business this year," said Tim Wallinger, who fishes for salmon on his boat, Nancy, out of Bodega Bay.

"I'm 25 now, I've been commercial fishing since I was 14 and I bought my boat four years ago," said Wallinger. "I just can't make enough money to keep fishing under these kinds of conditions. And it's not just fishermen who will get hurt. Ice houses, restaurants, tackle shops -- anybody who has anything at all to do with this fishery is going to suffer."

There is a bitter irony to the situation, fishermen say, because Chinook from the Sacramento River are abundant offshore; but Sacramento salmon largely will remain off-limits, because they mingle with Klamath fish in the ocean.

The Klamath's salmon runs have declined dramatically during the past 50 years, with most biologists blaming agricultural water diversions and hydropower dams that impede fish passage, heat the river excessively and serve as reservoirs for fish-killing parasites.

Still, it now appears that at least some wild salmon will be caught and purveyed to the public.

"It will be quite tight," said John Coon, the council's deputy director, of the upcoming season. "With this option, we're looking for an escapement of 21,000 Chinook to natural spawning grounds on the Klamath."

To ensure such a return, Coon said, major commercial restrictions must be imposed.

The council imposed a 75-fish limit per week per commercial boat. At \$5 per pound -- a good price -- that would leave a fishermen with a gross revenue of about \$5,500 per week, which has to pay diesel, salaries, boat upkeep and all other expenses.

After reviewing a copy of the recommendations, Chuck Wise and Duncan Maclean of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations suggested including commercial fisheries inside the 6 mile limit of the Fort Ross area and inside the 3 mile limit of the Bodega Bay area. Both fisheries would run during the first two weeks of July. More than 60 supporters, mostly commercial fishermen, spoke in support of the recommendation.

The council approved a clause that would allow the possibility of such fishing later in the season.

Troy Fletcher, a member of the Yurok tribe and a natural resources consultant, said the council's recommendation underscores the necessity of fixing the Klamath's problems. The Yurok own and live on lands along the lower Klamath, and depend on the river's fish for sustenance and income.

"We don't necessarily support the recommendation, but it is what it is," said Fletcher. "Given the best available science, fisheries managers have to manage fisheries."

Fletcher said efforts now must be made to improve conditions on the river, most specifically by removing the dams.

The anticipated recreational season will be fairly generous, more or less conforming to a typical season, except that no fishing will be allowed in federal waters in April.

Recreational fishing has been allowed in state waters -- within 3 miles of the coast -- since April 1. But that fact is irrelevant around the Bay Area, because the salmon currently are 15 miles or more offshore.

"The only place the fish are in state waters is around Monterey," said council member Darrell Ticehurst. "That's the only place anyone is catching any salmon right now."

Under the expected season, recreational fishing will begin May 1 in federal waters from Point Arena to Pigeon Point. It will run through Nov. 12, except for two closed days in June and two closed days in July.

From Pigeon Point to Point Sur, recreational fishing will run from May 1 through Sept. 24.

The problem is unlikely to be resolved anytime in the foreseeable future, meaning that opportunities for both commercial and recreational fishermen may further dwindle in coming years.

The total number of Klamath chinook swimming in the ocean this year probably is fewer than 30,000 fish, marking the second time the pre-season forecast is fewer than 35,000 returning adults.

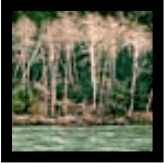
If the same thing happens next year, it will trigger additional restrictions. For fishermen -- and aficionados of wild salmon -- it's a long tunnel with little or no light at the end.

Bill Murtha, who fishes for salmon, albacore and swordfish on the Mary Vincent out of Moss Landing, said the season restrictions are a raw deal for consumers as well as fishermen.

"They're getting short-changed," he said. "They want fresh troll-caught wild salmon, not this farm-raised junk that's getting thrown at them. It's like comparing a vine-ripened tomato from your backyard to a hot-house tomato you buy at the supermarket."

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The Klamath River flows near Happy Camp in Siskiyou County in March. Salmon runs in the river have decreased, and wild salmon fishing in the ocean faces restrictions. Chronicle photo by Kim Komenich



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Klamath River. Chronicle Graphic



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