

Salmon fishing closed for California, Oregon

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(04-10) 20:24 PDT SAN FRANCISCO -- No commercial or recreational salmon fishing will be allowed off the coast of California and most of Oregon this year.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council voted Thursday to cancel the chinook fishing season in an effort to reverse the catastrophic disappearance of California's fabled run of the pink fish popularly known as king salmon.

"I think it's probably the right thing to do," said Barbara Emley, 64, who has run a commercial fishing boat with her husband out of Fisherman's Wharf since 1985.

"It's tough, though. We're going to lose our (fishing) community. People are going to have to figure out what to do with five months of no income."

Just hours after the vote, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency and sent a letter to President Bush asking for his help in obtaining federal disaster assistance. In addition, the governor's office announced that Schwarzenegger will sign legislation to appropriate about \$5.3 million for coastal salmon and steelhead fishery restoration projects.

"California's salmon runs are a treasured state resource and provide significant contributions to our economy and our environment," Schwarzenegger said. "Today's decision by the Pacific Fishery Management Council underscores our responsibility to quickly free up state and federal resources to help the fishing industry cope with the devastating economic impacts closing the season will have."

The Pacific Fishery Management Council, meeting in SeaTac, Wash., considered a variety of options for saving the salmon because too few fall-run chinook came back to spawn in the Sacramento River and its tributaries in autumn.

Fishing ban the only option

In the end, it decided the only option was to halt fishing throughout the salmon habitat all along the California and Oregon coasts, the first time that's happened since the federal

agency was created 22 years ago to manage the Pacific Coast fishery. Its management plan required it because of the low numbers of salmon and only an emergency ruling by Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez could change the requirement, and that, according to fisheries experts, is unlikely.

The council's recommendation will be forwarded to the National Marine Fisheries Service for approval by May 1.

"This is a disaster for West Coast salmon fisheries, under any standard," said council Chairman Don Hansen. "There will be a huge impact on the people who fish for a living, those who eat wild-caught king salmon, those who enjoy recreational fishing, and the businesses and coastal communities dependent on these fisheries."

The commercial salmon season off California and Oregon typically span from May 1 to Oct. 31. The recreational season was to have begun on April 5, but was delayed until the council made its decision.

The council canceled the seasons after the fall run in the Sacramento River and its tributaries saw the number of spawning fish drop from more than 800,000 just six years ago to slightly more than 68,000 last year. Experts are predicting that a little more than 50,000 fish will be in the river this autumn.

The Sacramento fall spawning season was the last great salmon run along the giant Central Valley river system, including the San Joaquin River, and nobody knows for sure what has caused the precipitous decline of the chinook salmon. The National Marine Fisheries Service has pointed to a sudden lack of nutrient-rich deep ocean upwellings caused by ocean temperature changes as a possible cause. But most biologists say it is a combination of factors, including agricultural pollution, water diversions from the delta and damaged habitat.

"The reason for the sudden decline of Sacramento River fish is a mystery at this time," said council Executive Director Don McIsaac. "The only thing that can be done in the short term is to cut back the commercial and recreational fishing seasons to protect the remaining fish. The longer-term solution will involve a wide variety of people, agencies, and organizations. But for now, unfortunately, those involved in the salmon fisheries are paying the price."

Millions in losses

If the ban holds, it would mean the loss of \$20.7 million that commercial and recreational salmon fishing brings into the California economy each year. The 400 or so commercial fishermen in the state stand to lose 70 to 80 percent of their annual incomes.

Losses in Oregon would top \$9 million. At least 1,000 fishermen troll the waters for king salmon between Santa Barbara to Washington state.

Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, said he was disappointed that the decision had to be made, but he doesn't fault the council.

"We're trying to get a disaster declaration to get (fishermen) through this and get them some money until things can be turned around," he said.

The next step, he said, is to get the commercial fishermen actively involved in the decision-making process for addressing water issues in the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

"We've really got our work cut out for us," he said. "We knew there were problems, but this year they really came home to roost."

Tina Swanson, senior scientist at the Bay Institute and a fish biologist, said problems in either the ocean or the river system can disrupt the salmon population, but problems in both areas can be catastrophic. And that is essentially what has happened, she said.

"We can't do anything about conditions in the ocean," she said, "but we can control what goes on in the river. We need to do a better job of management to protect the salmon habitat.

"This isn't something that happened in just one year. It's been going on for some time."

Meanwhile, the people who fish for a living and those who do it recreationally will not be the only ones to feel the effects of the ban. Consumers will be hurt, as well.

Salmon in fancy restaurants will likely go for around \$40 a portion, about twice the normal price.

Michael Weller, executive chef with the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, said salmon is so popular among consumers that they will continue to buy the fish at markets, even if the price rises substantially.

At restaurants, however, Weller predicted that chefs will not replace wild salmon with the less-tasty farm-raised variety. Instead, he said, consumers will most likely see greater choices of striped bass or halibut.

The price fishermen get for their catch has gone up from about \$1.75 a pound three years ago to about \$5.50 a pound, but to most anglers, the situation isn't about money anymore. It's about survival of a species.

Salmon off-limits

The problem: Record low numbers of salmon returning from the ocean to the Sacramento River.

What happened? The Pacific Fishery Management Council voted for a ban on commercial and sport chinook fishing off the coast of California and most of Oregon.

What's next? The council's recommendation is expected to be approved by the National Marine Fisheries Service by May 1.

After fishing for more than 60 years, Frank Damato of the Leonilda at Fisherman's Wharf, says a salmon fishing ban would put him out of business. Other fishermen are also pessimistic. Chronicle photo by Paul Chinn



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