

April 11, 2008

Salmon 'emergency' spawns new limits

Unprecedented fishing restrictions follow collapse of Calif. chinook run

By [ROBERT McCLURE](#)
P-I REPORTER

SEATAC -- Calling flagging numbers of salmon an emergency, federal fisheries managers slapped unprecedented restrictions Thursday on West Coast salmon fishing.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council virtually eliminated fishing for salmon in the ocean alongside most of Oregon and all of California, and substantially restricted fishing for coho along the Washington coast.

Fishing for chinook along Washington survived relatively unscathed, though.

Gov. Chris Gregoire said she would consider asking for emergency federal aid to fishermen if the restrictions prove financially disastrous here. The governors of Oregon and California already have requested such aid.

"We will have zero commercial fishing on salmon between Cape Falcon (in northern Oregon) and the Mexican border. We will have a minimal -- very minimal -- recreational fishery on salmon," said council member Rod Moore, director of the West Coast Seafood Processors Association in Portland.

"We need to do it to protect our salmon stocks, in order to follow the law, but it's going to hurt."

The council's action was prompted by the precipitous collapse of chinook salmon from the Sacramento River, the backbone of California's salmon fishery. While fisheries managers look for at least 122,000 of those fish to return and spawn every year just to repopulate the run, they're expecting less than half that number this year.

As recently as 2002, some 775,000 of those fish returned to spawn.

Because those Sacramento chinook range up the coast, mixing with healthier stocks farther north, fishery managers said almost all fishing had to be disallowed.

The only exception for ocean fishing is for 9,000 coho to be caught off central Oregon, compared with an average of about 81,000 a year from 2000 to 2005. Catching those coho is expected to result in the deaths of about 55 Sacramento chinook.

Representing California's state government, council member Marija Vokovich led the losing side of a 8-4 vote against even that greatly reduced fishery.

"I am unable to see where we can afford any fishing. Every fish that doesn't go back to the river counts this year," Vokovich said. "We've never been in this situation with this Sacramento run of salmon that supports two states' salmon fisheries."

Oregon recreational fishermen were bitter, saying they should not pay the price for poor water management in California, which they blame for the Sacramento stock's collapse.

California has an elaborate water-delivery system keyed on the Sacramento River delta east of San Francisco.

"The whole problem is California doesn't know how to manage fish," said Jim Welter of Brookings, Ore., a former commercial fisherman who still fishes for sport. "Everybody on the coast is paying for their inability to manage fish."

Council staff members, federal fishery scientists and others aren't so quick to blame California's water-management practices, noting that there are many possible causes for the decline of the Sacramento stock.

For example, it's well known that a phenomenon still not fully understood caused the Pacific Ocean's coastal food web to collapse in 2005, killing tens of thousands of sea birds and presumably starving the Sacramento chinook that went to sea that year. It's that year's smolts that are set to return in such low numbers this spring and summer.

In Washington, the coho catch had to be strictly limited because of endangered stocks in the lower Columbia River and along the Oregon coast because they, too, head to sea and turn right -- meaning they can get killed along the Washington coast. Those stocks are protected under the Endangered Species Act, unlike the Sacramento fish.

The National Marine Fisheries Service can overrule the council's decision. The agency's decision is expected by the time the fishing season usually starts May 1. Salmon fishing already had been greatly restricted for the winter and early spring, although summertime is the prime season.