



Pacific Fishery Management Council *NEWS RELEASE*

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SACRAMENTO SALMON FORECAST AT ALL-TIME LOW

The Pacific Fishery Management Council has released a report indicating that Sacramento fall Chinook salmon abundance will fall to an all-time low in 2008. While the report does not yet forecast an exact number of Sacramento River fall Chinook, the information infers total abundance to be near the low end of the spawning goal range in 2008, even if all ocean and freshwater fisheries are closed. (The spawning goal of 122,000 to 180,000 is the optimal number of adult fish returning to hatcheries and natural spawning areas for the long term productivity of the stock.) "This is very bad news for West Coast salmon fisheries," said Pacific Council Chairman Don Hansen. "The word 'disaster' comes immediately to mind, and I mean a disaster much worse than the Klamath fishery disaster of 2006."

The Pacific Council will begin the process of setting 2008 ocean salmon seasons at its meeting March 9 – 14 in Sacramento, California, where it will develop up to three options for public review¹. Final Council action on 2008 ocean salmon commercial and recreational seasons will occur at its April 7 – 12 meeting in Seattle, Washington.

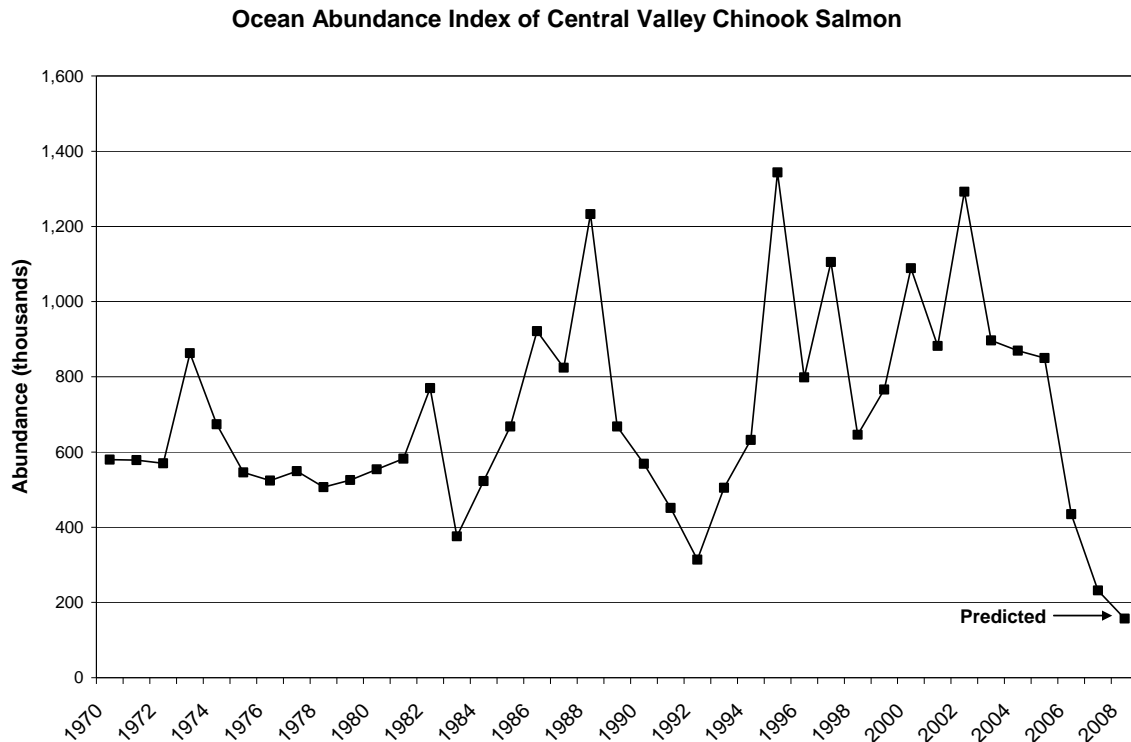
Biological Information

Sacramento River salmon are primarily caught off California and Oregon, but are also found off Washington and as far north as British Columbia. They are typically one of the healthiest and most abundant stocks on the west coast, and are the dominant contributor to both commercial and recreational fisheries off California and most of Oregon. Sacramento River fall Chinook are not listed under the Endangered Species Act, like Sacramento Winter Run Chinook and some other California stocks.

The graph below provides some historical context for the decline in abundance, showing an abundance index of ocean salmon catch and freshwater salmon returns composed primarily of Sacramento River stocks. It shows the forecast for 2008 at about 22% of the long term average, and about two thirds of last year's poor showing. The

¹ Agenda online at <http://www.pcouncil.org/events/2008/pfmc0308.html#agenda>

report containing abundance forecasts, *Preseason Report I: Stock Abundance Analysis for 2008 Ocean Salmon Fisheries*, was prepared by the Council's Salmon Technical Team in February. It is available online.²



The forecast of very low abundance is based on the return of “jack” salmon in the fall of 2007. Jack salmon are young male fish that return to the rivers as two year olds, unlike adult fish which return at age three or older. Jack salmon are currently the best statistical indicator of returning adult population the following year. Only about 2,000 Sacramento River fall Chinook jacks returned in 2007, by far a new record low count. This compares to a long-term average of about 40,000 and the previous record low of about 10,000, which occurred in 2006.

“The biological situation for Sacramento River fall Chinook salmon is unprecedented in our experience,” said Pacific Council Executive Director Dr. Donald McIsaac. “We are looking at back-to-back record low brood year production, even though the parent spawning levels exceeded the spawning goal.”

It is also notable that the return of adult fall Chinook salmon to the Sacramento River in 2007 was less than the spawning escapement goal for the first time in 15 years (88,000, compared to the goal of 122,000-180,000). This low return of adult salmon followed the

² Report available at <http://www.pccouncil.org/salmon/salpreI08/salpreI08.html>

then-record low return of 10,000 jacks in 2006. Adult returns of this stock to spawning areas have averaged 416,000 over the previous ten years, including a high of 755,000 in 2005³.

Economic Impact

The economic implications of the low abundance of Sacramento River fall Chinook salmon could be substantial for commercial, recreational, marine and freshwater fisheries. In California and Oregon south of Cape Falcon (in northern Oregon), where Sacramento fish stocks have the biggest impact, the commercial and recreational salmon fishery had an average economic value of \$103 million per year between 1979 and 2000⁴. From 2001 to 2005, average economic impact to communities was \$61 million (\$40 million in the commercial fishery and \$21 million in the recreational fishery).

Lack of fishing in 2008 to protect Sacramento fall Chinook salmon will come as bad news to beleaguered salmon fleets on the west coast. California and Oregon ocean salmon fisheries are still recovering from a disastrous fishing season in 2006, when Klamath River fall Chinook returns were below their spawning escapement goal for the third consecutive year. The catch of salmon in 2007 in these areas was also well below average.

Causes for the decline

The reason for the decline is unclear, but both hatchery and naturally-produced fish are similarly affected. At its upcoming meeting in Sacramento, the Council will review a list of 46 possible factors that may be contributing to the decline⁵. In the past, ocean conditions have been a major determinant of Sacramento stock productivity, and may have played an important role in this decline. Freshwater conditions also play an important role in brood year strength. Other possible causes include abnormal interactions with prey species (such as krill) and predators (such as sea lions), as well as human-caused effects such as pollution, water diversions, construction, habitat loss, or changes in hatchery operations. Unfortunately, no quick answers to the question of what caused the decline are expected in the short term. "We need to thoroughly research what has gone wrong for these two broods of Sacramento fall Chinook," said Marija Vojkovich, the California Department of Fish and Game representative for the Pacific Council. "But the first step is to identify where to focus the research."

Management Process

At its March 8-14 meeting in Sacramento, California, the Council will develop a range of three fishery management options for public review. Salmon management discussions begin on Tuesday, March 11, when the Council will review 2007 salmon fisheries and

³ See *Review of 2007 Ocean Salmon Fisheries*, <http://www.pcouncil.org/salmon/salsafe07/salsafe07.html>

⁴ Figures are state-level income impacts.

⁵ Available online at http://www.pcouncil.org/bb/2008/0308/D1b_CDFG.pdf.

discuss stock abundance estimates. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee will provide a peer review of the 2008 forecast elements for Sacramento fall Chinook salmon. Later on Tuesday, the Council will tentatively adopt salmon management measures for analysis by Council technical teams and scientists. Discussions will continue on Wednesday and Thursday afternoon. Friday, the Council is scheduled to formally adopt the fishery management options for public review. "Regarding fishing seasons affecting Sacramento fall run Chinook, I won't be surprised to see the Council look at the 'totally closed' option as one option, that is, closed to both sport and commercial fisheries," said Council Vice-Chairman Dave Ortmann. "This is a very important and valuable stock of fish, particularly to the regional salmon fisheries off California and Oregon."

Public hearings to receive input on the options are scheduled for March 31 in Westport, Washington and Coos Bay, Oregon, and for April 1 in Eureka, California.

At its April 7 -12 meeting in Seattle, Washington, the Council will consult with its scientific and fishery stakeholder advisory bodies, hear public comment, and choose a final option for ocean commercial and recreational salmon fishing. The California Fish and Game Commission will set freshwater seasons affecting Sacramento fall Chinook salmon later in 2008.

All Council meetings are open to the public. Based on previous experience with contentious salmon fishery issues, the Council expects there to be a large public turnout at both the March and April meetings and the public hearings.

Press Packet and Briefing Materials Available

A press packet with contacts, background information, a preliminary agenda for the March Council meeting, a map of affected areas, and acronyms is available on the Council website at http://www.pcouncil.org/newsreleases/sal_presspacket.html.

Detailed materials for Council decision-making will be posted on the Council's online Briefing Book at <http://www.pcouncil.org/bb/2008/bb0308.html> as it becomes available.

Council Role

The Pacific Fishery Management Council is one of eight regional fishery management councils established by the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976 for the purpose of managing fisheries 3-200 miles offshore of the United States of America coastline. The Pacific Council recommends management measures for fisheries off the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington.

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