



Pacific Fishery Management Council *NEWS RELEASE*

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PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL EXPECTS LOW SACRAMENTO SALMON RETURNS

California Central Valley fall Chinook salmon stocks appear to be undergoing a significant decline, according to Pacific Fishery Management Council Director Donald McIsaac. Although the numbers are currently being verified by the Council, Dr. McIsaac said that if the low abundance is confirmed, all marine and freshwater fisheries impacting this important salmon stock may be affected. The low returns are particularly distressing since this stock has consistently been the healthy “work horse” for salmon fisheries off California and most of Oregon.

Last week, the Council’s Salmon Technical Team (STT) met to tabulate salmon returns and catches. Two areas of bad news emerged. First, in 2007 the adult spawning escapement for Sacramento River fall Chinook failed to meet the escapement goal (122,000-180,000 adults) for the first time in 15 years. Sacramento River fall Chinook are the largest component of Central Valley Chinook. (The escapement goal, or conservation objective, is the optimal number of adult fish returning to spawn in order to maximize the production of the stock).

Second, the count of “jacks” in the Central Valley fall Chinook return this past fall was a record low. Only 2,000 jacks returned, compared to a long-term average of about 40,000 and the previous record low of 10,000. Jacks are immature fish that return to the rivers at age two (unlike adult fish, which return at age three or four). Their numbers are used to forecast future returns. This suggests that 2008 abundance will probably also be weak. Last week scientists questioned whether returns in 2008 could meet the conservation objective even without *any* commercial or recreational salmon fishing where these fish are found. If returns do not meet the conservation objective, an emergency rule from National Marine Fisheries Service may be required to allow any fisheries.

Reason for decline

The reason for the decline is unclear. Both hatchery and naturally produced fish have been negatively affected, and returns of coastal stocks in Oregon, in the Columbia River, and in British Columbia were all low in 2007. The decline seems to be a coastwide phenomenon, probably related to ocean conditions.

Economic implications

The implications of a precipitous decline could be substantial for both commercial and recreational fisheries coastwide. In 2006, a similar decline in Klamath stocks led to major cutbacks in salmon fishing opportunities. Sacramento River salmon have a greater range than Klamath River stocks, and are caught in California, Oregon, Washington, and even British Columbia. They are considered the “driver” of commercial fisheries in Oregon and California.

Management process

The Council will grapple with these numbers and set harvest levels this spring. In three to four weeks, the Council will release estimates of salmon abundance for 2008. Then, at its March 8-14 meeting in Sacramento, California, the Council will develop a range of management options. Salmon management discussions begin on Tuesday, March 11, when the Council will review 2007 salmon fisheries, discuss stock abundance estimates, and 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 adopt management options for public review. These options will probably range from status quo harvest levels to significant closures. 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. The Council will consult with scientists, hear public comment, and revise preliminary decisions until it chooses a final option at its meeting during the week of April 7 in Seattle.

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

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

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 is responsible for fisheries off the coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington.

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