

Feds vote to halt Calif. chinook salmon fishing

April 9 2009, By JASON DEAREN , Associated Press Writer



Hugo Tapia, a worker at the Princeton Seafood Fish Restaurant & Market, holds up a frozen Wild King Salmon from Canada, at his market in Half Moon Bay, Calif., Wednesday, April 8, 2009. Federal fisheries managers are deciding the fate of California's chinook salmon fishing season after record low returns were recorded in the Central Valley last year. (AP Photo/Paul Sakuma)

(AP) -- California's commercial chinook salmon fishing season will be called off again after a record low number of fish returned to spawn last year, federal fisheries managers announced Wednesday.

The decision by the Pacific Fishery Management Council will almost completely curtail commercial fishing in Oregon as well, but it allows the sport and commercial seasons in Washington state to proceed.

The decision marks the second straight year that the council has halted

commercial angling for natural and hatchery chinook [salmon](#), or "king" salmon, in California. The vote must be approved by the National Marine Fisheries Service before May 1.

King salmon populations returning to the Central Valley to spawn have declined in recent years, with the council estimating that 66,264 salmon adults returned to the Sacramento River in 2008. The estimate was down from 90,000 in 2007. More than 750,000 adult salmon were counted in 2002.

Chinook salmon hatch in freshwater streams and rivers, then migrate to the ocean where they feed and grow before returning to spawn in the fresh waters in which they were born. Large water pumps in the Sacramento Delta and ocean changes have been blamed for the decline in California.

The Sacramento River chinook run often provides the bulk of salmon caught off the coasts of California and Oregon. Returns in the Klamath River, another salmon spawning river north of the Sacramento, were higher but still smaller than expected.

Some fishermen said they were prepared for the season to be called off and hope the actions will improve their livelihoods in coming years.

"It's better off sitting out this season, then looking at good projections for next year," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations, an industry group.

Salmon return forecasts in the Sacramento River are expected to double next year to 122,196. But that estimate would mean only 196 fish could be legally caught, because biologists say the rest are needed to sustain the population.

Congress approved a \$170 million relief package last year for struggling fishermen and related businesses to make it through the year. About \$50 million was set aside in anticipation of this year's season being canceled, Grader said.

Dave Bitts, who has fished salmon for 30 years, said some salmon anglers switched to catching groundfish like black cod to help make ends meet, but most stopped fishing.

"Even if we all went to groundfish, there's no combination of fisheries out there to replace the loss of salmon," Bitts said.

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