

Big Challenges for the Salmon Fishing Community

The commercial and recreational fisheries for Chinook (or king) salmon have been a key feature of Santa Cruz and other central coast fishing ports for decades. The local fishery, part of the larger West Coast salmon fishery, is managed by both federal and state agencies. The federal Pacific Fishery Management Council manages the fishery through the Salmon Fishery Management Plan (FMP), adopted in 1977. The salmon FMP's key features are an annual goal for the number of spawning fish in the major salmon stocks ("spawner escapement goals"), and allocation of the harvest among different groups of fishermen (commercial, recreational, tribal; ocean, inland). State regulations include quotas, minimum size limits, and gear restrictions.

The timing and location of the fishery are based on the migratory patterns of the fish, and on regulations designed to protect threatened and endangered runs of salmon and insure adequate escapement for reproduction. In recent years, the California fishery has been open from April 1 (recreational) or May 1 (commercial) through September 30, although not all areas are open throughout this period each year. The number of fishing days per season is lowest in the northern part of the state, to protect depressed Klamath River stocks, and increases south to the US - Mexico border. As a result, salmon fishing activity has been most concentrated in the San Francisco and Monterey (Bay) port areas.

Following several years of strong runs of the Sacramento River fall run Chinook, however, there have been marked declines in this mainstay of the fishery. With abundance forecast to be about half the escapement goal (meaning that even if all ocean fisheries are closed, the conservation goal would not be met), the Council developed three management options:

- 1) Allow a small amount of recreational and commercial ocean Chinook fishing, and a small quota for Sacramento Basin freshwater sport fisheries. This would mean about 10 days of recreational ocean fishing, and one month (late in the season) and a 3,000 fish quota for the commercial fishery in each of three California management regions.
- 2) Allow a catch and release genetic research experiment for (about 1,600) Chinook salmon in California. This collaborative research effort between local commercial fishermen and NOAA Fisheries scientists was tested locally last season. They recently secured federal funding to expand the study statewide.
- 3) Prohibit all ocean salmon fishing.

On April 10, the Council voted for Option 3, closing the ocean salmon fishery throughout California and most of Oregon. The social and economic impacts are likely to be felt from Avila north, within and beyond the salmon fishery, harbors, support businesses, and consumers. In the coming months, state and federal scientists and others will evaluate some 48 factors for their possible role in the fishery's striking coast-wide decline. State and federal politicians are expected to seek a federal disaster declaration and funds to help fishery participants, support businesses and communities adapt.

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