

## California chinook fishery's collapse a disaster

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Federal officials on Thursday declared a failure in the West Coast ocean salmon fishery, an announcement that will allow the region to seek disaster aid for fishermen and others affected in California, Oregon and Washington.

The disaster declaration results from a collapse of the Sacramento River chinook. These California chinook are a mainstay of the West Coast harvests, and many are believed to have perished several years back as they emerged from freshwater amid poor ocean conditions and reduced food supplies.

To protect the California chinook, there will be a near closure of all ocean salmon harvests off California and most of Oregon. Meanwhile, a small portion of northern Oregon and Washington will have limited seasons for sport, tribal and commercial fishermen to target Columbia River chinook as well as a diminished run of coho salmon.

Overall, it will be the worst harvest in the history of the West Coast salmon fishing.

"This is a bleak year," Jim Balsiger, acting assistant administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries Service, said in announcing the declaration in Portland.

The governors of Oregon, Washington and California have said they could seek as much as \$290 million in disaster aid, citing the ripple effects that the fishery has through the coastal economies. About \$36 million of that money would be for Washington.

But the direct effects of the closures are forecast to be a small portion of the overall loss.

A federal economic analysis estimates \$60 million in impacts to fishermen, processors, charter-boat operators, bait shops and others involved in the harvests.

That estimate includes about a \$22 million hit for commercial fishermen, with about \$1 million of that loss coming from Washington state.

For consumers, the closures mean the loss of fresh-caught local salmon. They are hooked — not netted — and typically bled at sea, so they usually command premium prices. But there will still be wild salmon from the much larger Alaska harvests, where most of the fish are netted. Farm salmon have also become a year-round offering in supermarkets.

Prices for all salmon are expected to be higher, due in part to rising fuel costs and the West Coast harvest restrictions.

This dismal West Coast summer season comes as the region is deep into a massive, long-term effort to restore the region's salmon runs by improving freshwater streams and rivers where the fish spawn, develop and migrate en route to the sea.

In the Sacramento River, the young salmon face many challenges resulting from irrigation diversion and other efforts to harness the river for human use.

But until recently the Sacramento chinook run appeared to have turned a corner and was on the upswing, according to Rod McInnis, the southwest regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries.

This year, however, the run has plummeted to a historic low. Fewer than 60,000 adult chinook are expected to return this year to the river, less than a third of the minimum needed to sustain the run.

Stocks of Columbia River chinook, which head north to feed off Alaska, have not plummeted. There is a strong run of spring fish returning, and the returns also are expected to be good in the next few years.

The California fish feed off Oregon, where ocean conditions in recent years were poor. Federal fishery officials are hoping that's part of a cyclical downturn rather than a long-term trend that could be linked to climate change.

"I am optimistic that this is likely to be a short-term perturbation, said Bob Lohn, the Northwest regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries.

Lohn said attempts to model the effects of climate change do not yet give a clear view of the effects on the salmon's ocean food supply.

So far this year, initial ocean surveys off Oregon indicate an ample food supply for young salmon emerging from freshwater, according to Bill Peterson, a NOAA fisheries scientist.