

Canada 'caught in middle' over salmon cull

West coast states ban fishing for chinook

Zosia Bielski, National Post
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Canada will not be bullied by the United States into limiting its cull of threatened chinook salmon this year, despite a ban on all fishing of the species off the west coasts of California and Oregon, according to Gerry Kristianson, of Canada's Pacific Salmon Commission.

On Thursday, the U.S. National Marine Fishery Service announced the closure of commercial and recreational fishing for chinook salmon off the west coast, the first such ban in 160 years.

In Vancouver next week, officials from the U.S. and Canada will discuss the lucrative chinook culls, the final and most contentious piece of re forging the Pacific Salmon Treaty, a 10-year agreement that divides up harvests between the two countries. The present treaty expires at the end of the year.

Mr. Kristianson said Canada had offered to reduce its harvest, if the U.S. limits its own in Alaska.

"Canada's caught in the middle because we're under tremendous pressure from Washington, Oregon and, to some extent, California to reduce our interception of their fish, but there has to be a reduction north of us, otherwise, we become the ever thinner slice of meat in the sandwich between two parts of the United States," he said.

Mr. Kristianson said the greatest resistance is coming from Alaska, "who of course are used to being able to get the lion's share of the fish and who don't want to give that up.

"Canada's interests do not lie in fishing down weak stocks of American fish because if those stocks are strong, we get to harvest some of them. Similarly, we're not going to be the Boy Scouts of the planet."

Five species of salmon live in the Pacific Ocean: chinook, sockeye, coho, pink and chum. The largest and most valuable is the chinook salmon, otherwise known as the king salmon. Sports fishermen prize it for its size: the fish can grow up to 11 kilograms.

Salmon scientists and fisheries managers are particularly concerned about declines in California, the biggest spawning losses appearing in the Sacramento River and its tributaries.

Jeff Grout, regional resource manager of salmon for Fisheries and Oceans Canada, attributes the declines to changes in climate.

"What we've seen is a weakness of fish that went to the ocean in 2005. Our salmon like cold water and the zooplankton and other food species that are in that cold water. In 2005, we had very warm water that our juvenile salmon were going out into and it appears there wasn't a lot of food available for them to eat."

He says the government is working to preserve more vulnerable chinook from over harvesting.

"We're putting together fishing plans to ensure sufficient numbers of fish reach our spawning grounds in 2008 and to sustain the species in coming years."

Those measures include reduced harvests at some key fisheries and limits on recreational culls, particularly for the early time Fraser River chinook that spawn as early as March.

Chinook salmon are anadromous: they hatch in rivers, migrate to the ocean and return to their native streams to lay eggs (or spawn), usually between May and January, before dying.