

FISH MANAGERS TALLY 2009 SALMON RETURNS, ANGLER NUMBERS; PREDICT IMPROVEMENTS FOR 2010

December 18, 2009 (PST)

Adult salmon returns to the Columbia-Snake river basin should be improved almost across the board, according to a Dec. 17 preliminary draft "2009 Adult Returns and 2010 Expectations" produced by fishery officials.

The various forecasts in the document were produced by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife or the Technical Advisory Committee, a panel of federal, state and tribal fishery experts.

Of the stocks assessed, only sockeye salmon are expected to be down in number this year. The preseason forecast for a 2009 return of 183,800 sockeye to the mouth of the Columbia was close; the actual return actual return was 179,000.

The preliminary estimate for 2010 is for a return of 124,600 sockeye to the basin. That total would still be the seventh highest return dating back to at least 1980.

Most of the sockeye are from the Okanogan and Wenatchee river basins. Both rivers empty into the Columbia in central Washington.

Last year's total included sockeye from central Idaho high country. A total of 1,219 were counted passing over Lower Granite Dam this year. It was by far the highest count ever recorded at the dam, which was built in 1975. Snake River sockeye are listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

The draft forecasts are for improved returns of spring, summer and fall chinook in 2010 over 2009. Those projections are all based on 2009 jack counts at Columbia and Snake river dams that were well above average and set records in some cases. Jacks are young fish that mature precociously and return to freshwater a year or two earlier than their broodmates.

The upriver spring chinook salmon forecast is for a record return of 470,000 adult fish in 2010. The forecast takes into account the fact that a record 81,782 jacks were counted passing Bonneville Dam this year. That jack total is four times the previous record. Upriver spring chinook are stocks bound for hatcheries and tributaries upstream of Bonneville in Idaho, Oregon and Washington.

The Willamette spring chinook return to the Columbia is predicted to nudge up to 62,700 next year, including 45,900 adult hatchery fish. That would be up from 2009's actual return of 39,410, which was the fourth lowest return since 1970.

A total of 37,627 of the Willamette springers are estimated to have made it to their home river, which pours into the Columbia at Portland about 100 river miles from the Pacific Ocean. A total of 28,514 spring chinook were counted climbing the fish ladders at Willamette Falls. Anglers harvested 4,229 in the lower Willamette, and caught and released another 1,050 unmarked fish.

Spring chinook stocks headed for Washington tributaries to the lower Columbia are also expected to rebound.

The spring chinook forecast for the Cowlitz River in 2010 is 12,500. That's up from last year's actual return of 4,900 fish.

The 2010 return to the Kalama River is pegged at 900, up from 2009's actual adult return of 350. Last year's total was the second lowest since at least 1980. The increase in 2010 is based on improved 3-year-old jacks returns this year from the 2006 brood.

And the Lewis River return is expected to be 6,000, more than three times the 1,900-fish return this year.

The 2010 upriver summer chinook return is expected to surge to 88,800 adult fish, of which 67 percent are likely to be 4-year-old fish. The 2009 jack return of 22,264 was 300 percent of the recent 10-year average.

Bright and tule fall chinook returns to the Columbia basin are also expected to be improved next year, again based on high jack counts in 2009. Numerical forecasts will not be available for the fall chinook stocks until later this winter.

Likewise, coho salmon and upriver summer steelhead forecasts are forthcoming. Both species produced bumper crops this year. The 603,000 steelhead counted at Bonneville was the second highest since counts began in 1938. The actual 2009 coho return fell just short of the 703,300 preseason prediction but was well above the recent 10-year average of 508,300.

During the 2009 spring season anglers caught and kept nearly 17,000 chinook in the lower Columbia (from Bonneville Dam 146 miles down to the mouth of the river) during 152,000 "angler trips." They released another 3,200 chinook. They also caught and kept 590 hatchery steelhead and released 154.

Anglers are required to release spring chinook and steelhead that aren't marked at hatcheries with a clipped adipose fin. Unclipped fish are likely to be wild fish. Wild Upper Columbia and Willamette spring and Snake River spring/summer chinook are protected under the Endangered Species Act, as are numerous wild steelhead migrants. Fishery managers estimated that 84 percent of the spring chinook catch in 2009 had a fin clip.

Anglers also caught and kept 254 spring chinook, and released 58, in Columbia mainstem reservoirs between Bonneville and McNary dams.

During the summer season anglers caught and kept 2,256 summer chinook, 900 sockeye and 9,602 hatchery steelhead in river reaches from Tongue Point just east of Astoria, Ore., to Bonneville. They released 8,180 steelhead.

The Buoy 10 fishery at the Columbia's mouth produced a sport catch of 5,700 chinook and 49,000 coho during the summer season.

In the fall season, sport fishers harvested 14,711 adult fall chinook, 3,989 coho and 7,325 steelhead in the lower Columbia. The steelhead catch was a record.

The Columbia's gill-net fleet caught 4,150 spring chinook during the winter/spring season during three outings in March on the lower Columbia mainstem. Commercial fishers swept in 2,371 summer chinook, 219 sockeye and 624 sturgeon during the summer season.

The fleet accounted for 28,222 chinook, 1,331 coho and 2,969 sturgeon in August and 6,758 chinook, 43,910 coho and 2,001 sturgeon during the late fall season.