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Editorial

The Trouble With Salmon

The federal government's decision to shut down commercial salmon fishing from the California coast to north-central Oregon is a blow to local fishermen and the coastal economy.

This decision is necessary if there is to be any hope of salmon recovery. It will mean even more if it shocks Congress into a serious investigation of the West Coast salmon crisis, exposes the politically driven policies of the Bush administration and persuades a new president of the need to rebuild wild salmon populations and the economies that depend on them.

Chinook salmon runs in the Sacramento River in California's Central Valley have collapsed. The numbers of salmon returning to spawn, which had held steady at about 475,000 for several years, dropped to 90,000 last year and were expected to be half that this year.

Two factors are suspected. The federal government yielded to the demands of big agricultural interests and diverted so much of the Sacramento's normal river flow to farmers that many baby salmon — who need free-flowing water to push them downstream — could not make it to the ocean. Scientists also believe that abnormalities in ocean temperatures, possibly related to global warming, could have deprived the fish who managed to get downstream of their food supply.

Two other coastal systems, historically rich in salmon, are in trouble. The Klamath River Basin experienced devastating collapses in 2005 and 2006. In the huge Columbia-Snake River Basin, a dozen different varieties of wild salmon are listed as endangered or threatened. In both cases, federal policy that disproportionately favors energy interests and agricultural users is a major factor. Karl Rove himself intervened in the Klamath to make sure the farmers prevailed.

In the Columbia-Snake system, where dams are a huge problem, a federal district judge in Oregon, James Redden, has rejected three federal recovery plans, including one from the Clinton administration. He has threatened to assume management of the dams if Washington cannot produce an acceptable fish recovery plan.

California's Congressional delegation said last week that it would seek as much as \$150 million in disaster aid to help coastal fishermen. A long-term salmon recovery plan would be of even greater value.

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