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Salmon's gone, so is the season

Fishing - The West Coast faces about \$290 million in losses

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Federal officials formally closed most of the West Coast to salmon fishing Thursday and declared a commercial fisheries failure for the second time in three years, the first step in providing cash to fishermen left idling at the docks.

West Coast lawmakers said they were moving quickly to secure federal money for fishermen and fishing communities hurt by the closure. State officials estimated Oregon's losses at \$44.9 million, Washington's at \$36 million and California's at \$208 million.

The fishing closure marks the most severe failure of the West Coast salmon fishery in history, officials said. The economic toll is expected to exceed the cost of a 2006 fishing shutdown caused by the collapse of Klamath River salmon.

Financial aid in that episode was slow. Congress provided \$60 million, but the money didn't arrive for more than a year. Elected officials said the process should be faster this time.

Fall chinook salmon populations from California's Sacramento River have collapsed to record low numbers. The downturn surprised many fishermen and biologists because the Sacramento fish are considered a reliable backbone of West Coast salmon populations. They make up 60 percent to 80 percent of salmon caught off the Oregon coast.

Their numbers are expected to fall so low that too few may return up the river this fall to provide eggs for fish hatcheries.

Federal fish managers put much of the blame on poor ocean conditions that left young salmon without much food when they migrated from the river into the ocean. Before the downturn, they said, salmon had been recovering because of restoration efforts that helped improve river systems where the fish spawn.

About five years ago, Sacramento River salmon numbers boomed.

"We thought we had turned the corner," said Rodney McInnis, regional administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service's Southwest Region. "It leaves us wondering what the next step needs to be."

Even experts have a hard time predicting how ocean conditions will affect young, vulnerable fish, said Robert Lohn, administrator of the agency's Northwest region. Such conditions operate in long cycles, he said. "It may be that we're in a period of exceptional disruption."

But fishermen and some experts said dams and degraded river conditions have compromised salmon, making them especially vulnerable to shifting conditions in the ocean.

"The real concern is that we've taken up the salmon habitat. . . . We've killed the estuaries," Paul Heikkila, a fisherman based in Charleston, said. "Now we're looking at paying the piper."

Though salmon can recover from poor ocean conditions, he said, they can't recover as easily from concrete dams that block their migration paths.

Damage to rivers and the delta where the Sacramento River flows into San Francisco Bay set up the salmon for a fall when ocean conditions went bad, said Peter Moyle, a professor at the University of California at Davis who is an expert on salmon.

The question this year is whether coastal communities can maintain their salmon fishing infrastructure so it's still there when fishing opportunities return, Heikkila said. "Most of the fleet I know would rather be out fishing."

Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., said West Coast lawmakers might try to tack financial aid for fishermen onto an emergency appropriations bill for the Iraq war that could come up as early as next week. That would have to be negotiated with other lawmakers and the Bush administration, he said. "If it isn't this vehicle, we'll have to find another one very quickly."

Reps. David Wu and Peter DeFazio, both Oregon Democrats representing coastal communities, said they would fight for federal aid.

Wu blamed the fisheries decline on "gross ecological mismanagement by an administration that is stone deaf to the cultural and economic needs of the Pacific Northwest."

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