

Fishermen urge probe into decline of salmon

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A passel of salmon fishermen took to the nation's capital on Wednesday, lobbying Congress for a federal inquiry into the dismal returns of juvenile chinook salmon on the Sacramento River, the West Coast's most important smolt source.

The seven trollers held a press conference in Washington, D.C., to announce that they're dissatisfied with the federal government's explanation for the worst number of "jacks" returning to California's Central Valley on record — 2,000 fish, compared to the long-term average of 40,000.

Government scientists have said the steep decline is a mystery, probably tied to ocean conditions. But a growing chorus of skeptics is beginning to challenge that notion, and they want someone to figure out exactly why the salmon runs are so anemic.

"There are an awful lot of questions about habitat conditions, as opposed to other reasons for the fishery's failure," said Bob Kemp, a troller from Newport.

John McManus, spokesman for the nonprofit environmental law firm Earthjustice, said federal officials pumped a record 6.4 million acre feet of water out of the Sacramento River in 2005, despite warnings from government scientists that such action would jeopardize protected fish in the watershed, a decision that could help explain the bad numbers of late.

"Those fish of '05 are the class of '08," said Jim McCarthy, a spokesman for Oregon Wild, a Portland-based conservation group. "People are saying it's ocean conditions, and that may have played a part in it. But the operation of pumps on the Sacramento used to divert huge amounts of water have turned the river into a reverse-flowing river in some places, sucking smolts backwards."

The fishermen who gathered Wednesday are asking for congressional hearings on what went wrong in the river, plus more research on the health of fish populations.

"If the salmon were in better condition, if the habitat was healthier, they'd be better able to withstand whatever ocean conditions are occurring," said Paavo Carroll, a troller from Charleston. "The problem is, they're not as resilient as they ought to be."

Ocean conditions fluctuate, said Dave Bitts, another salmon fisherman from Eureka, Calif., but the fish have to make it to the ocean before they can be affected there.

Rod Moore, executive director of the West Coast Seafood Processor's Association and a member of the Pacific Fishery Management Council, said Wednesday that it's up to Congress whether to investigate the source of problems on the river.

"There have been folks who have been talking about water diversions in the Sacramento system

as being a possible cause ever since the poor returns were announced. I don't know what the answer is," Moore said. "I'm not an expert on California water diversions."

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