

The Eugene Register-Guard

Fishermen to receive disaster assistance

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The Register-Guard

Published: May 2, 2008 12:00AM

Perhaps to blunt the news of an unprecedented salmon fishery closure along the West Coast, the federal government paired its announcement of a final decision on this year's salmon season Thursday with a heartening dispatch: The fleet can expect tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of dollars in disaster assistance this year.

U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez declared a commercial fishing failure and fishery resource disaster for ocean salmon fishing off the coasts of Oregon, Washington and California, which allows Congress to appropriate direct aid to the fleet and other affected businesses, depending on how much cash is made available.

The exact figure could range anywhere from \$61 million — federal officials' estimate of the direct losses the three states can expect without a salmon season this year — to \$289 million, the amount requested by those states after factoring in ripple effects to tackle shops and other related businesses along the coast.

What number Congress arrives at will depend on what Northwest lawmakers can convince their colleagues is reasonable, said Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore. Oregon has asked for \$45 million.

"The six senators from the affected states are of one mind on this," Smith said. "Beyond that, we have to go with the support of our colleagues."

The first shot at an actual appropriation comes with Congress' consideration of a supplemental appropriations bill to fund the ongoing Iraq war, which is how \$60 million in disaster funds won approval in 2006.

The White House is opposed to adding spending unrelated to war spending to the bill, Smith said.

"This is a federal government declaration, and there is therefore a federal government obligation," he said.

"(The Iraq war bill) is the next vehicle leaving the station, but there's going to be a lot of pressure to keep anything unrelated to the war out of that."

The disaster declaration was welcome news to 29-year-old Stuart Schuttpelz, a Charleston troller who took out a \$160,000 loan to buy a salmon boat in 2005 after fishing with his father in Alaska for the previous 10 years.

Schuttpelz said he wanted to stay closer to home to spend more time with his three young children.

Soon after Schuttpelz's gamble, however, salmon stocks on the Klamath River collapsed, and now that they're on the mend, the lowest returns in the history of the bigger, more important Sacramento River have crippled the region's fishery.

Meager returns from Dungeness crab and tuna won't make up for the salmon losses or cover the \$22,000 mortgage payment due in September, Schuttpelz said.

"I had to refinance the loan just to afford refrigeration this year," Schuttpelz said.

In 2006, he made the mortgage payment with help from a \$29,000 assistance payment from that year's disaster declaration, which is the only reason he is still in business, he said.

"I really couldn't imagine not getting financial aid," Schuttpelz said. "It's not a hurricane; we didn't get our houses blown down, but we legitimately don't have jobs, because of the lack of salmon."

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