

## **Editorial: A Season Without Salmon (Eugene) Register-Guard**

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For the first time in the 150-year history of the West Coast fishing industry, Oregon and California fishermen face the devastating prospects of a season without salmon.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council voted last Thursday to cancel the chinook fishing season in an effort to reverse the near disappearance of the Sacramento River's legendary run of the pink fish known as king salmon.

No one should point fingers at the council, which considered a range of options for saving the salmon after a dismayingly small number of chinook returned last fall to spawn in the Sacramento River, once the second largest salmon producer in the lower 48 states.

Ultimately the council had only one viable option, and that was to halt fishing throughout the salmon habitat all along the California and Oregon coasts. Only a reversal by the National Marine Fisheries Service or an emergency ruling by Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez could change the council's decision, and neither is likely.

The aborted season is terrible news for coastal communities in which salmon has long been a financial mainstay not only for fishermen, but for local businesses ranging from fish buyers and ice plants to supermarkets and truck dealerships.

After two disappointing salmon seasons, a third could push fishermen out of business. Many have barely managed to hang on by turning to other species, such as crab and tuna. With no income from salmon, many will be unable to cover boat mortgage payments and moorage fees, and many of the businesses that rely on income from fishermen may also fail.

That dire scenario can be prevented, or at least mitigated, if the federal

government immediately begins the process of issuing the disaster declaration needed before Congress can approve emergency assistance for the fishing industry.

The governors of Oregon and California, as well as the congressional delegations from both states, urged Gutierrez last month to declare a fishery disaster. He should do so immediately and avoid last year's needless delay that held up desperately needed federal aid until, for some, it was too late.

The collapse of the Sacramento chinook has been nothing less than epic. The numbers of spawning fish have dropped from more than 800,000 just six years ago to just over 68,000 last year, and fisheries experts predict that few more than 50,000 fish will be in the river this fall.

The National Marine Fisheries Service points to changing ocean conditions as the probable cause, in particular a recent lack of nutrient-rich deep ocean upwellings caused by water temperature changes.

But ocean conditions are only a partial explanation, and the Bush administration must be held to account for its policies that have contributed to excessive water diversions from the Sacramento River Delta, agricultural pollution and deteriorated habitat.

If that sounds familiar, it's because similar policies and conditions contributed the Klamath River's poor returns, which forced severe ocean-fishing restrictions in 2005 and 2006.

Last year, the Columbia River Basin, which once had the world's most prolific salmon runs, saw less than 2 percent of its historic salmon return in the fall. As a result, federal regulators were forced to cut commercial fishing, already at historic lows, in half.

Fishermen and coastal communities will be in the same position for years to come unless there is a fundamental shift in federal salmon policy. It's time Congress to conduct hearings on the West Coast salmon crisis and for lawmakers to craft a cohesive, workable policy that will bring the fish back to West Coast rivers.

It's also time for the two remaining Democratic presidential candidates, who may be visiting Oregon in the weeks to come, to commit to a forward thinking,

flexible salmon policy, one that does not preclude the breaching of dams, if necessary, to save West Coast's iconic salmon. ###