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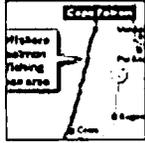
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U.S. to ban commercial salmon season

Peter Fimrite, Chronicle Staff Writer

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(04-08) 19:52 PDT Millbrae -- Lovers of king salmon will have to settle for fish hooked in the Pacific Northwest this year under a federal agency's recommendation Wednesday to ban the commercial catching of salmon off California and much of Oregon in an attempt to save the fabled fish.

The move, which the National Marine Fisheries Service is expected to make final by May 1, comes after the fewest chinook salmon ever recorded made their way up the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers last fall.

"There are just no fish," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations. "If they allowed any fishing, they would be putting at risk future fishing."

Wednesday's decision by the 14-member Pacific Fishery Management Council, meeting in Millbrae, marks the second year in a row that commercial fishermen will not be allowed to reel in chinook.

Only 87,881 of the fish returned to the once-thriving salmon factory known as the Sacramento-San Joaquin River system in 2007, and a record low of 66,286 returned last year, according to estimates extrapolated from a count of egg nests in riverbeds.

Fisheries biologists are projecting that, even without fishing this summer, the fall run of chinook will be almost twice as plentiful as last year's, but the numbers will barely reach the council's minimum goal of 122,000 fish.

A fishing ban this summer had been expected since March, when none of the three options outlined by the council included commercial fishing in the two states.

The council, established three decades ago to manage the Pacific Coast fishery, advised that some sport fishing be allowed in California and Oregon, mostly where the much-improved Klamath River salmon runs are located.

The Klamath and Trinity river runs were declared a disaster in 2006, but runs there are looking better than the Sacramento this year. Recreational fishermen would be allowed to take chinook from Aug. 29 to

Sept. 7 from the mouth of the Klamath River to southern Oregon.

Some commercial and sportfishing of hatchery-raised coho salmon - identifiable because the fleshy adipose fins have been removed - will be allowed in Oregon during July and August.

The Sacramento River's spawning run was the last great salmon run along the giant Central Valley river system, which includes the San Joaquin River, where leaping, wriggling chinook were once so plentiful that old-timers recalled reaching in and plucking fish right out of the water.

Chinook, known scientifically as *Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*, hatch in rivers and streams. Also known as king, spring or tyee salmon, they pass through San Francisco Bay and roam the Pacific Ocean as far away as Alaska before returning three years later to spawn where they were born in the Sacramento River and its tributaries.

The fall run in September and October has for decades been the backbone of the West Coast fishing industry. At its peak, it exceeded 800,000 fish. Over the past decade, the number of spawners had consistently topped 250,000.

A study last month by federal, state and academic scientists blamed the collapse of the fishery on poor conditions in both the ocean and river.

Destruction of river habitat, water diversions and dams in the Central Valley so weakened the fall run that it couldn't withstand two recent years of scanty food supply in the warming Pacific Ocean, according to the study commissioned by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Exacerbating the problem, researchers said, was the demise of three other distinct runs of salmon - winter, spring and late fall - and the reliance on less genetically diverse hatchery fish instead of naturally spawning wild populations of chinook.

Whatever the cause, more than 2,200 fishermen and fishing industry workers lost their jobs as a result of last year's ban. While they received federal disaster aid, fishing communities and fishing-related businesses lost more than \$250 million.

"We just need to decide that we value wild California king salmon," said Larry Collins, a San Francisco salmon and crab fisherman. "We know what to do to make these runs healthier. Until we leave enough water in the rivers for the salmon, we're going to continue to be up against it."

Restrictions on river fishing will be decided in May or June by the California Department of Fish and Game, which allowed about 600 chinook to be caught last year, angering commercial fishermen who opposed any fishing.

"The best thing fishermen can do this year is attend all the water board hearings and let the governor

know how his water policies are hurting our industry," Grader said. "In the meantime, it's going to be a struggle."

Salmon peril by the numbers

- 250,000** Number of chinook that spawned in Northern California each year for much of the past decade
- 87,881** Number of salmon that returned to the Sacramento-San Joaquin River system in 2007
- 66,286** Record-low number of the fish that returned last year
- 2,200** Number of workers who lost their jobs as a result of last year's fishing ban

E-mail Peter Fimrite at pfimrite@sfgate.com.

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