

FISHERMEN'S NEWS

The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman



Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

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Drought Legislation Threatens Coastal Salmon Fisheries

By Tim Sloane and John McManus

IT'S NOT ROCKET SCIENCE: fish need water to swim, hunt and breathe. The more water in a system, the more fish that can survive in it. And when water is removed from a system and not replenished, the fish that are there have less of a chance to survive. Simple.

Such is the continued plight of West Coast salmon fisheries. As we've pointed out in this column often, the more water available to salmon when they're in the freshwater stages of their lives, the more likely it is that we'll see more of those fish in the ocean when it's time to catch them.

Which is why it is critically important for anyone interested in fishing for salmon on the West Coast to keep an extremely close eye on proposed California-based "drought relief" legislation working its way through Congress.

Things Are Tough in California

As most salmon fishermen are painfully aware, California and the western United States are mired in the fourth year of possibly their worst drought in recorded history. The effects of that drought are especially painful in the Golden State, where water supplies are many times over-allocated and where water supply infrastructure makes it possible for special interests, with a little lobbying, to get their hands on what little supplies are available.

The drought has been particularly hard on salmon, and by extension,

fishing communities. Salmon spawn high up in the same freshwater streams that are tapped to supply industrial irrigators over 400 miles away. Those fish need at least minimal supplies of cold, clean water in order to produce enough offspring to support a robust fishery. But the competition for that water makes it incredibly challenging to do so.

Consider this: in 2014, California lost 95 percent of its naturally spawned Sacramento River winter-run Chinook and 95-98 percent of its naturally spawned fall-run Chinook salmon, before those fish even had a chance to get to the ocean. The cause of that massive die-off of juvenile salmon was apparent: the operators of Shasta Dam, which impounds a reservoir of water destined for agricultural operations, released too much water too early in the year in an attempt to satisfy California's grossly over-promised agricultural water rights and contracts.

Then when the river got too hot (for lack of water) in August of 2014, the many salmon redds (nests) below Shasta Dam cooked. Most of the incubating eggs never even had a chance to hatch.

The US Bureau of Reclamation, which operates the dam, responded to the catastrophe by resolving to better manage the cold water supply in 2015 so as to protect baby salmon. But the drought, and the continued pressure on the Bureau to deliver water at any cost, made that

objective exceedingly difficult to achieve.

As of this writing, preliminary results are showing this year is even worse, with winter-run Chinook numbers actually dropping 22 percent lower than at this same time last year.

The numbers aren't all in yet for the fall-run, but the pressure to satisfy water contracts during the drought certainly didn't make it any easier for the Bureau to reserve as much water as the fish really needed. This was made all the worse by rapidly diminishing groundwater supplies that would otherwise supplement stream water deliveries – and the utter lack of rainwater.

Jon Rosenfield, a biologist who studies salmon and other fish in the Central Valley watershed, commented on this year's winter-run Chinook fish kill, saying "I don't know why – given the experience they had last year – anybody would have promised the amount of water [that contractors] were promised." It would seem that the escalating demand for water pushed the Shasta Dam water supply to the absolute brink – and then it broke!

Drought Legislation?

We already know that the salmon fleet is going to be severely constrained when those few surviving salmon, along with their more numerous hatchery counterparts, reach the age where we can harvest them at sea.



But several California Members of Congress have also introduced several “drought relief bills.” They all purport to help the disparate communities competing for the state’s limited water supply deal. But some of these proposals heavily favor certain water user groups over others.

The worst for the salmon fishery is the bill (H.R. 2898) proposed by Congressman David Valadao (R-CA), who represents a large swath of the southern agricultural community in the San Joaquin Valley. Rep. Valadao’s constituents are some of the largest (and most heavily subsidized) beneficiaries of water moved from northern California salmon streams to southern California irrigation operations, and so it was widely anticipated that his drought bill would heavily favor agricultural interests over salmon and the fishing community.

But Rep. Valadao’s bill was even worse than anticipated. H.R. 2898 rolls back critical laws that mandate the retention of water in streams to support fish populations, and makes it much easier for state and federal agencies to construct new dams that would block spawning adult salmon and migrating juveniles from accessing critical parts of their already greatly reduced habitat.

And while those provisions help agribusinesses move and store water, they don’t address the real problem: that there simply isn’t enough of the blue stuff in the system for everybody to get what they’re used to.

To add insult to injury, Valadao’s “drought relief” bill doesn’t provide any relief to anyone in the fishing community. So while industrial irrigators would have an easier time sucking salmon streams dry and hoarding that water in reservoirs, the fishermen, processors, shipwrights, tackle stores, truckers, restaurants, and everyone else who relies on salmon for their livelihoods gets the shaft. It’s as if they were deliberately trying to put us out of business, permanently.

The better answer is to support increases in the overall water supply by pushing for innovative water conservation, recycling and even water supply augmentation methods, such as solar-powered desalination plants. After all, what’s the use of being able to move and store water if we don’t have any to store?

Those types of water supply innovations are promoted in H.R. 2893, the competing bill by Congressman Jared Huffman (D-CA), who represents about half of the fishing communities in California from Bodega Bay all the way up to Crescent City. Unfortunately, Congressman Huffman’s bill hasn’t gained any traction in Congress, and looks like it won’t move forward.

Other than a lot of “fringe” bills with no chance of success, all that is then left is the bill (S. 1894) introduced on 29 July 2015, jointly by Senators Barbara Boxer (D-CA) and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) to cover the gap. This bill looks like a compromise between the Huffman and Valadao bills: it is steadfast in upholding laws requiring certain levels of streamflow for fish, while at the same time offering more reservoirs in the hope that rain someday returns to California. It’s not a panacea but at least it’s not a death knell for salmon fishermen in its current form.

The original Valadao bill recently passed the House on a largely party-line vote, and both it and the Boxer/Feinstein bill were recently heard in a Senate Energy and Natural Resources

Committee. As we move toward what looks like another dry year in California, something is likely to come out of this process and with it the danger of various “riders,” last-minute amendments and back-room deals pushed by continuing high-powered efforts by California Agribusiness to rewrite all the rules of California water policy to its liking – and salmon be damned!

And this is where you should really be paying attention.

Oregon and Washington Will Feel It, Too

California Central Valley-origin salmon can have huge impacts on fisheries well outside of California.

Research by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southwest Fisheries Science Center shows that in some years, California fish can constitute more than 70 percent of Oregon’s Chinook salmon harvest. [O’Farrell, et. al. The Sacramento Index, NOAA-TM-NMFS-SWFSC-512 at 13, Fig. 1, U.S. Dept. of Commerce (June 2013)]

What’s more, that percentage seems to increase as overall Chinook harvest in those areas decreases, as we would expect for Chinook brood years that hatched during drought conditions. And while Sacramento River-origin fish aren’t quite as large a component of the Washington fishery, annually coming in at 2-5 percent of the overall harvest, many of the commercial salmon fishermen in both Oregon and Washington transit to areas where California Central Valley Chinook are more abundant, and make at least part of their livings on those fish.

In short, if those California-origin salmon stocks decline too far, “weak stock management” constraints we are all painfully aware of would automatically kick in and could close down most of the West Coast ocean salmon fishery in the lower 48 states. This would make the disastrous worst-on-record closures of 2008 seem like a picnic. Furthermore, if the California water system is re-engineered by Congressional fiat as the Valadao Bill proposes, these ocean salmon fishery closures could be permanent as well as nearly coast-wide.

So even though it seems like these California-specific “drought relief” proposals might not affect you and your coastal community far away, if you’re a west coast salmon fisherman operating anywhere in California, Oregon or Washington, it most certainly does.

Congress is now working to iron out some sort of compromise between the radically different Boxer/Feinstein and Valadao bills, and the efforts by Agribusiness to use the “drought relief” issue to seize more California water are still moving forward. Now is the time for you to get involved!

Call your Congressional delegation or write a letter, asking for strong salmon protections in California. Your job just might be on the line. 

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