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## **Salmon Apocalypse Looming in California**

*Poor Government Policy Could Doom Record Runs*

Recent reports of a pending salmon die-off on the Klamath River don't address the full measure of this rapidly evolving and potentially catastrophic story.

"A record run of salmon are at risk on the Klamath unless anticipated flows from Trinity Reservoir are provided to cool the Lower Klamath River," said Tom Stokely, an analyst for the California Water Impact Network (C-WIN), a statewide water advocacy group. "But we have another disaster unfolding on the Sacramento River. We had a dry winter, the reservoirs are low, and federal and state officials are draining them rapidly to pump water to the corporate farms of the western San Joaquin Valley. If the current releases continue, we're not going to have enough cold water in the Sacramento system to keep fall-run Chinook salmon eggs alive in the gravel this fall."

Like the Klamath, the Sacramento River system is expected to post a very good year for Chinook salmon, with several hundred thousand fish returning to the river and its tributaries.

"And these are big magnificent fish, some of the fattest I've ever seen," said Dan Bacher, editor of the Fish Sniffer Magazine. "But I was just out on the river, and it was running extremely high – and that's heartbreaking. High water now means the cold water pools in Shasta, Folsom and Oroville reservoirs could be exhausted by the time the returning fish spawn. The mature fish, their eggs and any fry that manage to emerge could cook in the low, warm flows we'll probably see in the American, Feather and Sacramento rivers by late summer and fall."

The Sacramento River is the workhorse of the salmon-bearing streams south of the Columbia River. In good years, almost a million fish used to return to the Sacramento system. The river is unique in that it supports four distinct runs of Chinook salmon. The winter-run and spring-run are both listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, while the fall-run and late fall-run are sufficiently numerous in most years to accommodate the commercial and sport fisheries.

All four runs are now in dire jeopardy. The spring-run Chinook is facing an especially tough summer, particularly in Butte Creek, its primary stronghold. There was a major die-off of Butte Creek salmon in 2003 due to low flows.

"We desperately hope that there isn't a repeat of the 2003 spring-run salmon deaths on Butte Creek," said Jim Brobeck, a water policy analyst at AquAlliance, an organization dedicated to protecting the waters and fisheries of northern California. "At this time, the fish agencies are managing to keep thousands of spring-run alive with flows from PG&E's reservoir, although another concentrated heat wave could radically change conditions for this iconic salmon run."

Brobeck noted Butte Creek's spring-run is a genetic rarity, and the source for re-stocking efforts on the San Joaquin River. It is thus essential, he said, to preserve the unique strains of salmon native to the Sacramento watershed.

"The potential fish deaths due to lack of water and warm temperatures on Butte Creek combined with the demand for Klamath, Trinity, Feather and Sacramento River irrigation deliveries threatens the existence of what remains of native fish runs in the Central Valley," Brobeck says. "State and Federal agencies must redefine the "surplus water" that is being pumped to industrial agriculture south of the Delta."

Low flows could also prove the death-knell for the winter-run Chinook, said Bill Jennings, executive director of the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance.

"We're only in a second dry year, not even a declared drought, and the system is fundamentally broken," said Jennings. "The State Water Board has assured the Department of Water Resources and U.S. Bureau of Reclamation that it won't enforce Delta water quality and flow standards. The temperature compliance point on the Sacramento has been moved upstream, eliminating crucial spawning habitat for endangered Winter-run Chinook salmon."

But the Sacramento's "bread-and-butter" runs – the fall-run and late fall-run – are also at risk. Their status is so imperiled by anticipated low summer flows that future salmon seasons could be curtailed, said Stokely. Like Jennings, Stokely says agency mismanagement of water resources is the major reason for the crisis.

"What's particularly disturbing is the determination of state and federal agencies to violate their own mandates and regulations so they can maintain deliveries of subsidized water to a handful of huge corporate farms in the western San Joaquin Valley," said Stokely.

Stokely notes various laws and regulations require sufficient cold water flows down the Sacramento system to maintain fisheries in good health.

"But in May, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the state Department of Water Resources asked the Water Board to allow lower Delta outflows so more water could be sent south of the Delta," said Stokely. "The Water Board agreed without due process, in violation of its own rules water right decisions – and with full knowledge of the impacts to the fish. "

Jennings observes the crisis could have been avoided if the cold water behind California's reservoirs had been properly conserved.

"Water is only legally available for south-of-Delta export after Delta flow and water quality standards are met," Jennings said. "But the state and federal projects are still exporting more than 8,500 cfs from the South Delta"

Stokely concluded that the situations on the Klamath and the Sacramento are culminating in a potential apocalypse for California salmon.

"We had a huge salmon kill on the Klamath in 2002 due to low flows, but that could be minor compared to what we're facing today," he said. "It is a terrible irony. We're seeing some of the biggest runs on record, and we could lose them all -- and lose future runs -- because of compromised government policy. If we're going to avoid a repeat of 2002, we need to start conserving cold water now for release later in the summer and fall."

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