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Sacramento River Fall-Run Chinook Salmon Fail to Meet Minimum Returns for Third Year
Magnuson-Stevens Act prompts review by fishery managers

SACRAMENTO, Calif. – Discussions at this week’s Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting will include the beginning of an assessment on why the number of Sacramento River fall Chinook salmon returning to spawn have failed to meet the threshold established by fishery managers for three years in a row. The assessment is triggered by the salmon Fishery Management Plan (FMP) required under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Although the salmon FMP refers to such a three-year failure as an “overfishing concern,” the term, in this case, does not accurately reflect the true cause of the low numbers. Despite no commercial or recreational fishing for the past two years, the number of returning Sacramento River fall Chinook salmon is at the lowest numbers on record in 2008 and 2009.

Historically, the long term average of adult Sacramento River fall Chinook returning to spawn in hatcheries and natural areas has been 226,600. The goal, or conservation objective, of fishery managers is to achieve an annual return of within a range of 122,000 to 180,000 to ensure a sustainable and robust fishery. But in 2007, the number of Sacramento River fall Chinook returning to spawn was only 87,900. In 2008, just 64,500 fish returned and in 2009, a scant 39,500 returned, the lowest on record.

Because the conservation objective has not been met for the last three years, the Council will direct their Salmon Technical Team to work with state and tribal fishery managers to complete, within one year, an assessment on the factors that contributed to the shortfall of returning salmon and the opportunities for rebuilding future salmon runs. NOAA Fisheries Service led an investigation into the cause of the low returns in 2007 and 2008 and concluded that unfavorable ocean conditions led to poor survival of juvenile salmon as they entered the ocean environment in 2005 and 2006.

The number of Sacramento River fall Chinook salmon forecast for 2010 will be based partly on the return of “jacks” or juvenile salmon that return a year earlier than the other salmon they hatched with. In 2009, the number of jacks returning was 9,200 in comparison to 4,000 in 2008, which seems to indicate a possible increase for 2010.

The Council is scheduled to adopt three possible options for the 2010 ocean salmon fishing seasons at this week’s meeting. The Council will then select a single option during their April 9-15 meeting in Portland, Oregon.

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On the Web:

Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) Documents: Review of 2009 Ocean Salmon Fisheries - <http://www.pcouncil.org/salmon/stock-assessment-and-fishery-evaluation-safe-documents/review-of-2009-ocean-salmon-fisheries>