

Fishing Shutdown Will Ignite Another Water “Blame Game”

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The Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) at its meeting in Seattle last Thursday (April 10) voted to close recreational and commercial salmon fishing off the coast from Cape Falcon in northern Oregon to the U.S.-Mexico border. This complete closure of fishing for chinook salmon was made due to the "unprecedented collapse" of Central Valley salmon stocks.

This is grim, sad news for coastal fishermen, their families and communities. Two years ago, fishermen on the Oregon coast were hit hard by fishing restrictions brought on by low numbers of returning Klamath River salmon. I joined a group of Klamath Basin farmers and elected officials who worked closely with some leaders in the Oregon coastal fishing community that summer. We spent time visiting each other's communities, understanding new perspectives, and finding ways to support each other. Those fishermen are producers, just like the farmers and ranchers I represent, so it wasn't hard to find common ground. Especially when both groups had direct and painful experience from being on the receiving end of government regulations that shut down their communities.

While the new relationships forged that summer between potato farmers and trollers were a positive development, no one I know wants to see a return to the kind of situation that brought us all together in 2006. But the recent decision to shut down commercial fishing does just that, and applies a swath of potential economic devastation to an even broader area.

It will take some creative emergency funding measures and lots of prayers to get our friends on the coast through this year.

So, what has caused the once abundant Sacramento River salmon run to plunge to this new low? If you believe what many environmental organizations and West Coast urban newspapers say, it has to be the pumps in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta that convey water to millions of acres of some of the most productive farmland in the world and over 20 million Southern Californians. In the weeks leading up to the PFMC decision, the same old predictable arguments began to surface from "blame game" editorial boards focusing on the pumps. Many of these media outlets – taking a cue from environmental groups – were also quick to point the finger at Klamath Project irrigators and the Bush Administration when fish died on the Klamath River in 2002 and commercial fishermen were put out of work in 2006.

Sadly, the reasons for the decline of coho and Chinook salmon during the spawning seasons of 2007-2008 are much more complicated than what you might read in the op/ed section of your favorite urban newspaper. Last February, NOAA Fisheries prepared an assessment showing 70% or higher declines in returning adult Coho salmon on the coast of California and Oregon. The report found “no shortage of potential contributors to the decline”, and, yes, irrigation and water exports from streams were noted as two such potential factors. However, so were many other stressors, including flushing of juvenile fish to sea by high stream flows in 2005; increased predation by marine predators; oil spills; and fishing bycatch mortality.

More importantly, the report concluded that, because of the wide extent of the problem, a broader agent was likely responsible: ocean conditions. The first few months in the ocean are a critical period for salmon growth and survival. The NOAA report found that ocean conditions were poor for salmon growth and survival during critical times in both 2005 and 2006, which hurt salmon numbers in the following two years.

Despite the myriad of stressors that impact salmon, environmentalists and their allies in the mainstream media continue to focus on California’s plumbing system. Instead of supporting efforts to better understand and manage salmon in their marine environment, we see fingers thrust at irrigators and urban dwellers, heaping blame on diversions as the primary cause of problems.

A perfect example of this showed up in a Portland *Oregonian* editorial last week. While the paper’s editors acknowledged that “biologists think poor ocean conditions, possibly caused by global warming, are partly to blame,” the spotlight was quickly turned on – you guessed it – the Delta export pumps. “There’s no question that another part of the blame goes to massive diversion of water for irrigation and urban household use in California”, the *Oregonian* opined.

The operations of those pumps are carefully managed during salmon migration to minimize potential harmful impacts. Similar care was taken in prior years, as well, when returning Sacramento River salmon numbers shot off the charts. That particular fact is often conveniently overlooked by the media, however.

Publicly broadcasting selective and biased conclusions is not going to contribute to finding meaningful solutions that help salmon and the fishing communities that depend on them.