

July 1, 2015

If it's Broke...Fix it.

Quota of 237,000 Chinook salmon shows broken forecast system

July 1 is the most anticipated day of the year for Alaska trollers. It marks the start of the summer king season when there are usually lots of salmon to catch and the fishing grounds are fully open for exploration. No matter how long they've fished, there is not one troller who doesn't feel the elation of seeing just the right tug on a line that results in a beautiful, shimmering king salmon being hauled over the rail. That joy is tarnished this year by the fact that Alaska and Canadian trollers are fishing at levels that fall well below sustainable or fair.

The Pacific Salmon Commission (PSC) has capped Alaska's harvest of king salmon at 237,000 fish, down from 440,000 last year. The troll share is 175,000, a 54% reduction from 2014. Fishermen in two Canadian harvest areas have also seen their quotas significantly reduced. The northern troll and sport fleets, who rely heavily on king salmon, are caught in a technical dispute among PSC members over how many king salmon are expected to return to spawn in rivers along the West Coast.

The Pacific Salmon Commission implements the U.S.-Canada Pacific Salmon Treaty, which governs how many king salmon can be caught by Canada and Alaska. Since 1999, a model-based forecasting system has been used to estimate the abundance of fish each year and set harvest quotas in Alaska and Canada. The model used to generate the abundance estimate was developed by U.S. and Canadian scientists on the PSC's Chinook Technical Committee (CTC). In recent years, these model estimates have varied widely, creating significant disruption for trollers and their markets.

The Alaska members of the CTC roundly objected to this year's estimate, which heightens Alaska fishermen's concerns about the accuracy of the abundance- based system and the fact that they so often get shortchanged. At this point, we don't know what the proper quota should be, but the Alaska CTC says 237,000 is too low and we are 100% behind their efforts to correct the error.

For decades trollers have paid the price of habitat destruction in the Pacific Northwest. We reduced our harvest and fought to protect and rebuild habitat and keep water in the rivers. We've fended off fish farms in Alaska and advocated wild fish safeguards where they exist. The stocks we've worked so hard to rebuild are now returning to the Pacific Northwest in record numbers, yet Alaska fishermen are being held to a pitifully low quota that fails to recognize that high abundance. Trollers are losing faith that they will ever see a fair shake in this process.

During the past two years the Columbia River has experienced super-sized runs of king salmon, many of which spend most of their life off the coast of Alaska before returning to the Columbia to spawn. The 2013 and 2014 runs were the largest since 1938 when the first dam was installed on the Columbia. The 2015 forecast predicts the third-largest fall run, and spring and summer Columbia River stocks are making a huge showing, causing fishermen to further doubt the validity of the low abundance estimate for Alaska. King salmon are returning to the upper reaches of the Columbia in numbers that far exceed the capacity of available spawning area. Many of these fish are from hatcheries intended to mitigate fishermen for the loss of salmon due to hydropower dams. They are paid for by U.S. citizens, including Alaska fishermen.

In anticipation of the 2014 return, Alaska tried to secure a larger king quota to avoid putting too many fish on the spawning beds, which has been shown to reduce returns of Columbia River king salmon. About 30 percent

of Alaska's harvest is typically comprised of these fish and in recent years that percentage has been higher and includes large numbers of hatchery fish. Despite the enormous return, the other U.S. commissioners (from Washington, Oregon, the Tribes, and federal government) denied Alaska's request. The fish surplus ended up so large in 2014 that tens of thousands of unspawned hatchery kings were wasted. Another massive run is predicted for 2015. It's tragic to consider the wanton waste of this highly prized source of food. All our fleet wants is a scientifically defensible number that cares for the resource and provides a fair harvest share. Sadly, some folks to the south would rather destroy these magnificent fish by letting five times the escapement goal return to a drought-stricken river, rather than see one more of them taken by Alaska and Canadian fishermen.

The Pacific Salmon Treaty was signed in 1985 with the goal of rebuilding salmon runs from Oregon to Alaska and distributing the benefits amongst all West Coast fishermen. At treaty signing, many stocks were significantly depressed. Today, the stocks that migrate to Alaska are considered rebuilt and healthy, yet this year's king salmon quota is nearly 30,000 fish under Alaska's original rebuilding quota of 263,000.

It's unconscionable for the PSC to allow this number to stand. The model underpins the entire Chinook agreement and it is seriously malfunctioning to the detriment of Alaska and Canada. Not only is this yet another broken treaty promise, but it puts at risk the health of our industry and regional communities. The Chinook Technical Committee should be put back to work immediately, to right what's wrong here and get a more realistic handle on the quota before the fishing season is over.

The next generation of trollers is just beginning to take the wheel of the fishery. It's an exciting time and there is lots of optimism on the docks, particularly with these big runs of fish. It's just wrong to stifle such hope and enthusiasm with bad science and politics!

**** Dale Kelley is Executive Director of Alaska Trollers Association and has represented trollers in state, federal, and international arenas for 27 years. When not chained to her desk or in a meeting she feels fortunate to deckhand on a troll boat out of a small town in Southeast Alaska.*

Fast Facts:

- The Alaska troll fleet has harvested Chinook, coho, and chum salmon in state and federal waters off the coast of Alaska since the late 1880s. The Alaska Trollers Association has represented trollers since 1925.
- The troll fishery is one of the largest salmon fisheries in Alaska and 85 percent of the permit holders are residents, with the remaining 15 percent primarily made up Washington, Oregon, and California state residents.
- Roughly one of every 40 people in Southeast Alaska works on a troll boat and in most towns the majority of commercial fishermen are trollers.
- The troll fleet delivers premium quality salmon worth tens of millions of dollars ex-vessel each year. King salmon typically make up half or more of those earnings. Millions of tax dollars are extracted to assist the state general fund, communities, and hatchery programs around the region. Thousands of additional jobs are generated each year in the processing and support sectors.