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Treaty 'losers' making plans to fight for fish

A week after the latest version of the Pacific Salmon Treaty was announced, the presumptive losers in the deal were ready to take their messages to Washington, D.C., and Ottawa.

"We're putting all the stakeholders together — fishermen, local politicians, NGOs, First Nations, buyers, and the rest — to do an economic impact analysis," said Kathy Scarfo, director of the West Coast Vancouver Island Trollers Association.

"We'll expect government to cover what we've lost" — and the loss will be total, she said.

Northward, the other loser — the Alaska Trollers Association — plans to take its message directly to the nation's capital.

Both organizations face tough sells. The Canadian federal government has been notoriously tone-deaf about Western fisheries issues. And, Alaskans have two-thirds of their congressional delegation up for reelection this year. Seniority-rich incumbents Rep. Don Young and Sen. Ted Stevens were behind in polls in early June.

Alaska trollers are set to lose 15 percent of their annual harvest of Chinook under the treaty, despite the fact that the bulk of the fish they harvest are from healthy runs.

For the Vancouver Island trollers, the treaty is a requiem. After all the set-asides and treaty cuts, the harvest simply won't support the fleet.

"Trollers of both nations have been significantly harmed in order for the U.S. to get a deal with Canada," said Dale Kelley, executive director of the Alaska trollers.

"Alaska did everything right under the treaty. Fisheries were implemented according to a plan and commitments to research were met. Meanwhile, habitat and data issues affecting salmon have gone largely unaddressed in the Lower 48."

The new treaty agreement was negotiated within the Pacific Salmon Commission. It still must be approved in Ottawa and Washington, D.C. Money — \$45 million from the U.S. and \$7.5 million from Canada — also must be appropriated.

The 10-year treaty agreement was greeted with approval from a wide variety of politicians, fish bureaucrats, and newspaper editorial writers — all praising the document as a significant step toward better conservation of Chinook runs.

According to Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire, the treaty, if enacted, would mean about 1 million fewer Chinook would be harvested in B.C. and Alaskan waters over 10 years. About half would be destined for Oregon and Washington waters.

But just exactly what folks in the Lower B.C. Mainland, Washington, and Oregon will do with the extra fish isn't spelled out in the treaty.

However, a headline in The News Tribune of Tacoma gave a hint: "Sport anglers could benefit from new salmon agreement."

Scarfo said, "This treaty isn't about conservation. It hasn't been shown those fish will be back to their beds."

Kelley agrees. "It's been years since the 'overfishing' moniker could rightly be used in relation to Pacific Salmon Treaty stocks. In fact, you could probably stop all West Coast fishing and do very little to rebuild salmon runs. This is all about habitat."

Not to worry. Don Kowal, executive secretary of the Pacific Salmon Commission, is delighted. "The new agreement is designed to provide for effective conservation of the resources and to address the interests of the people affected by it."

Here's how the problem is set out in the treaty:

"While fishing has contributed to the decline of many stocks of concern, the continued depressed status of these stocks generally reflects the long-term cumulative effects of other factors, particularly chronic habitat degradation, in some instances, deleterious hatchery practices, and cyclic natural phenomena, which may be exacerbated by climate change."

In short, the treaty says "habitat" degradation is the single greatest killer of Chinook. Yet, beyond that page, the word "habitat" never is mentioned again in the treaty.

It's an oversight not lost on Kelley of the Alaska Trollers Association.

"Sadly, this is dressed up like a big conservation thing. You can have your hydro power. You can turn Puget Sound into an open sewer. You don't have to clean it up. But the truth is, if folks want more production, then these fish need clean and ample spawning grounds to return to."

Some observers whispered that it was about time that Alaskans made a sacrifice after other fisheries were socked in previous treaties reaching back to the mid-'80s.

Not so, said Pete Knutsen, who fishes Alaska and Puget Sound.

"The guys up there [Alaska] have been active trying to defend the Columbia River runs. They've done a damn good job preserving their habitat. They didn't let fish farms in.

"Compared to B.C. and Puget Sound, they've done a pretty good job overall. They deserve the fish." ↓

Salmon treaty: What's it worth to you?

Here's what the new salmon treaty will cost trollers off Southeast Alaska and Vancouver Island.

- The Canadians see the proposal as fleet extermination. "There's simply no way we can survive 10 years under that treaty," said Kathy Scarfo of the

trollers' association.

Here are the numbers: The West Coast Vancouver Island region will lose 30,000 Chinook. Yet, the region will be allotted an estimated 100,000 fish annually. That should leave 70,000 for the commercial trollers, right?

Wrong.

The virtually unregulated recreational fleet will take 50,000 Chinook, up from an anticipated high of 25,000 during the last treaty. First Nations will be guaranteed 5,000. Then, the 30,000 treaty fish will be deducted.

That leaves 15,000 Chinook. There are about 160 boats in the troll fleet. Figure 93 fish per year — certainly not enough to eek out a living for a decade, hoping for the good times. Individual boats need about 1,000 fish a year to survive, Scarfo said.

In addition, the fleet has foregone a coho fishery since 1999, and there is no other option.

The industry will die.

Scarfo's fishermen want a complete buy-out for the pre-treaty value of their businesses. Money the U.S. government would pony up to mitigate sacrifice on the island's west coast — \$30 million — isn't nearly sufficient, if indeed it reaches fishermen, she said.

One year ago, before jitters about the impending treaty and predictions that 2008 would be a weak year for Chinook, permits were selling for \$150,000. Boat and gear probably would be worth \$200,000.

That's \$350,000 minimum. The Yankee dollars would be sufficient to buy out about 8.5 Canadian fishermen.

• In Southeast Alaska, trollers see the treaty not as a quick death, but as a slow, yet

assuredly certain, death.

"It's just another step in the long-term strangulation of the fishery," said Dale Kelley of the Alaska Trollers Association.

The Alaska fleet has taken significant pains to conserve coastwide salmon, starting pre-treaty and then solidified with a 100,000 fish cut when the treaty was signed in 1985. This season, Southeast fishermen are confronting a 50 percent Chinook catch reduction. Now they're told to cut another 15 percent a year for the next 10 years.

Chinook are significant for the fishery. In recent years, up to half of the troll harvest dock price comes from kings. "It's a big chunk of our livelihood, and it fuels other local fisheries."

Prosperity of the fleet then will depend heavily on the abundance of coho salmon, Kelley said.

And if coho don't show, most Alaska trollers will be stuck. "We can't just get in a car and drive to another job."

Effects of the 15 percent reduction will be felt beyond the docks. Fishermen spend money in port, and businesses there survive by providing goods and services to fishermen.

Initial calculations indicate between \$30 million and \$40 million will be stripped from the Southeast Alaska economy because of the troll Chinook cuts, Kelley said — and that money must be replaced. ↓

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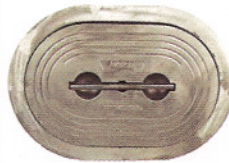
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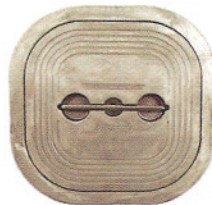
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