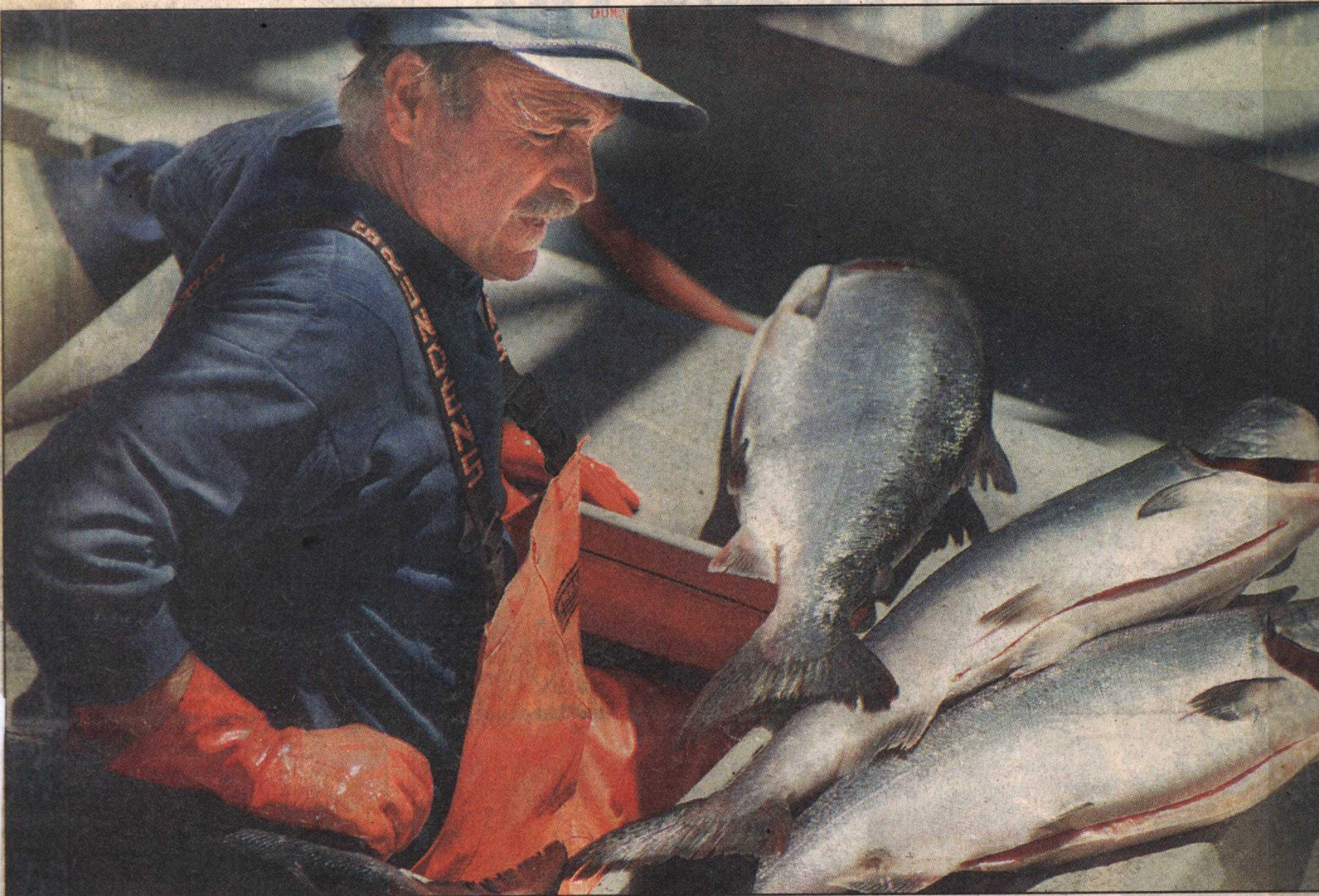


Season starts slowly

At right, Andrea Vyeniello, an inspector for the state Fish and Game department, helps load salmon into an icing tub at Moss Landing. Below, Tom Crager of Morro Bay unloads fish from the hold of his boat.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Cold water keeps commercial salmon catch small

By TRINA KLEIST
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — At this time of year, third-generation fisherman Joe Tomasello can usually haul a half-ton of fat, healthy king salmon into port at a time.

But Wednesday, after three days off Carmel Point, Tomasello brought just 19 fish to the docks.

"With this northwesterly wind we've been having, the wind just cools the water like you wouldn't believe," Tomasello said. "The fish are out there, they're just not biting."

Two weeks after the May 1 start of the state's

commercial salmon season, catches are a fraction of what fishermen normally see. Winds howling from the northwest have cooled water temperatures to below 50 degrees, just enough to make the salmon sluggish. Plentiful food turns their interest away from the fishermen's bait. Choppy seas double the danger for most local boats, which generally measure fewer than 34 feet in length.

Fishermen reported trawling as far as 18 miles from shore to a depth of about 150 feet, but with spotty results. Marauding sea lions, which have learned to follow the boats, further shadow the men's luck.

At H&N Fish Co. at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor, manager Josh Workman helped clean long, clean-smelling salmon and pack them into plastic tubs of ice. But he finished by mid-afternoon, even with nearly 30 commercial salmon boats moored nearby.

"Normally, we get 10,000 to 20,000 pounds of fish a day," Workman said. "Lately, we've been getting 500 to 600 pounds a day."

Similar catches arrive at Moss Landing, where about 100 commercial salmon boats from as far as Morro Bay and Newport, Oregon,

Please see SALMON — BACK PAGE

Continued from Page A1

await better weather, assistant harbor master Greg Montes said.

Locally caught salmon is selling for \$5 to \$7 a pound in stores. The fishermen are making about \$3 a pound at the dock.

Fishermen face more than adverse weather. State and federal regulations protecting certain types of salmon, such as the silvery coho, also constrain their work.

King salmon, also known as Chinook, receive protection at some rivers and for some spawning seasons. For example, king salmon that spawn in the Sacramento River during the fall are plentiful, and make up the vast majority of salmon being fished now.

But king that spawn in the Klamath River at any season, and that spawn in the Sacramento during the winter and spring, suffer small stocks and are protected by geographical fishing bans intended to keep fishermen

away from maturing populations out at sea.

Currently, all salmon fishing is banned from Point San Pedro, near Pacifica, north to above Fort Bragg. Seasons and permitted areas change as the summer wears on, following the endangered populations.

Those bans, based on information provided by the fishermen themselves, help restore stocks of endangered salmon.

"It's a big balancing act based on how we model the distribution of fish out in the ocean," said John Coon, salmon management coordinator for the Pacific Fisheries Management Council in Portland.

"We're trying to come up with the most seasons possible (for fishing) while at the same time meeting conservation constraints so we can preserve the stocks and ensure we have a harvest in the future," Coon said.

Predictions by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council for the salmon catch this year, from just north of Fort Bragg to the southern border, are:

- 336,000 king salmon for commercial fishermen, up from 214,000 King salmon harvested in 1998.
- 187,000 king for sport fishermen, up from 118,000 caught in 1998.

"We're looking at a similar to more liberal season than last year," Coon said.

Rough weather may not cooperate in the short run, however.

Meteorologist Steven Freitag, of the National Weather Service in Monterey, forecast continuing winds of 35 to 40 mph, with gusts up to 50 mph, through early next week.

The La Niña phenomenon is also keeping ocean temperatures cool, which contributes to maintaining the high pressure system over the Pacific. That, in turn, feeds the winds, Freitag said.

Fisherman Tomasello shrugged off the forecast. "If we have a week of nice, calm weather, we'll be fine," Tomasello said. "It's still early in the season."