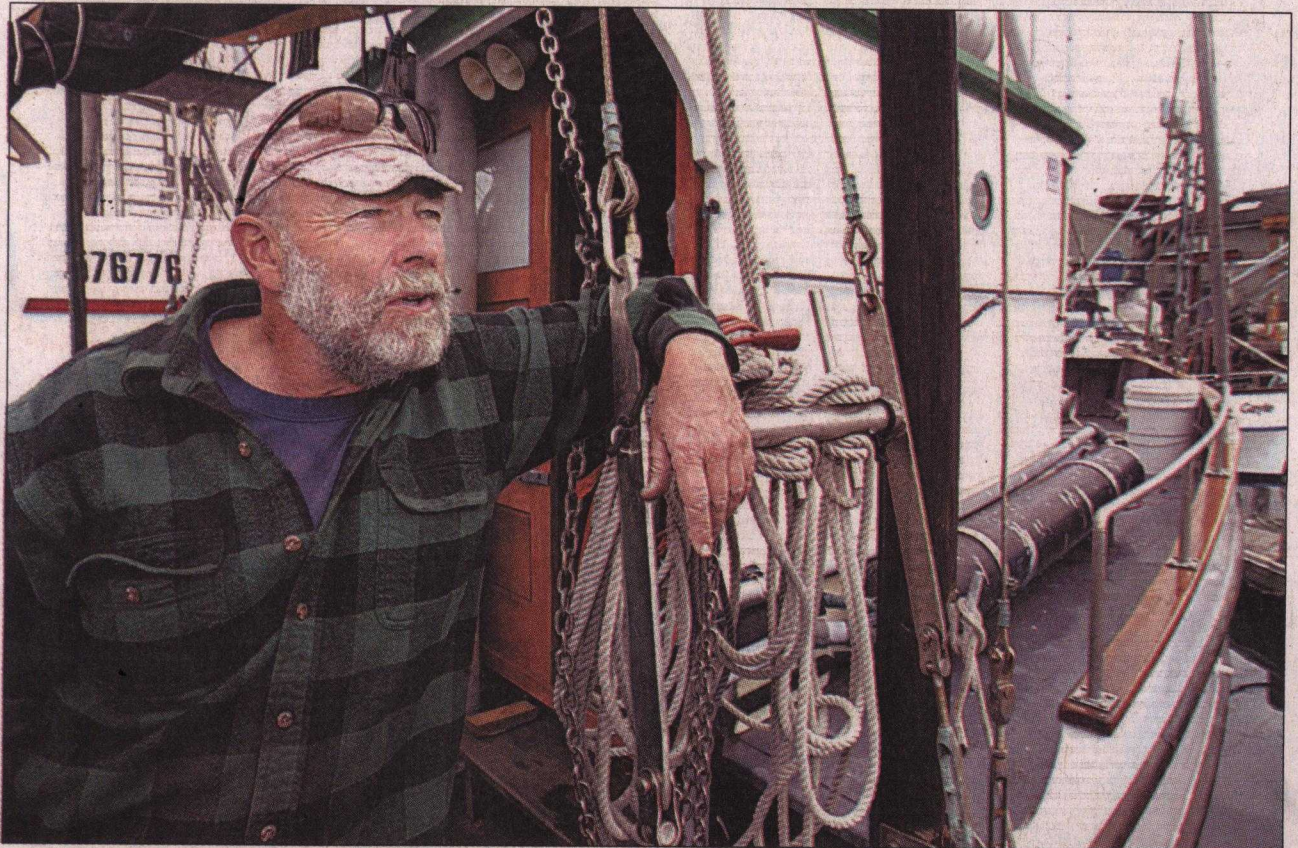


# SALMON SEASON CLOSED FOR '08



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Jim Moser, a Santa Cruz commercial fisherman for 35 years, is unsure what he'll do now that the salmon season has been canceled. Normally he would take his 44-foot boat to Oregon for albacore but now with the price of fuel so high, he says he may skip that as well.

## Fishing community ponders economics without a line in the water

By JULIA PRODIS SULEK  
MEDIANEWS

SANTA CRUZ — Ken Stagnaro doesn't want to be the one to end the fishing legacy of his storied family.

He's a fourth-generation Stagnaro, with his first child on the way. Growing up on the Santa Cruz wharf, where his family has run fishing and restaurant businesses since the pier was built in 1914, he has roots dating to the days when fish were caught with no more than lines tied to railroad spikes.

Through the decades, the Stagnaro family has survived sea storms that destroyed their boats, fishing accidents that maimed their patriarch, the requisitioning of boats by the military during World War II, and the sell-off of their fleet in 1980. In January, Stagnaro's 83-year-old Aunt Gilda — "queen of the wharf" — collapsed and died in a torren-

tial rain and wind storm on the pier just 90 feet from the restaurant that bears her name.

And now, after years of ever-tightening fishing restrictions, a critical part of Stagnaro's sport fishing business — salmon season — is being shut down.

With the population of wild Pacific salmon at historic lows, the season was closed to sport fishermen on opening day last weekend. Thursday, commercial fishing was added to the list. The Pacific Fishery Management Council voted to cancel all commercial salmon fishing off the California and Oregon coasts this year. Some recreational fishing of coho salmon will be allowed, but only off the Oregon coast, and only on holiday weekends.

Stagnaro didn't plan on such bad news when he sold his house a few years ago to build a handsome char-

**'There are people here who wait all year for this ... It's like closing all the golf courses for some people.'**

RICHARD KENT, 65



Robert Stagnaro, 79, sits with his nephew, Ken Stagnaro, 46, in Gilda's, on the Santa Cruz wharf. The salmon season is officially not opening.

Karen T. Borchers/  
MediaNews

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# Salmon

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ter boat specifically for those salmon fishermen.

"It's not that I want to give it up. You just feel you're in an uphill battle with the government," said Stagnaro, 46. "You want to get out of it just to fend off disaster."

Up and down the Pacific coast, including the harbors of Moss Landing, Monterey and Half Moon Bay, the news is crushing to sport fishermen as well as a shrinking group of commercial fishermen. Beaten down by increasing regulations, only a fraction of the commercial fishermen who made a living in the 1980s from the ocean remain. Now, about 400 fishermen along the California coast catch about 85 percent of the salmon. In the Santa Cruz harbor, about 10 diehards remain. None of them wants to decimate the species, but it's hard to bear.

"I'm not going to have any income until July" when the tuna season starts, said Wilson Quick, who was working on his salmon boat Sun Ra in the Santa Cruz harbor this week. "There will be a lot of people going broke — going out of business basically."

Longtime Santa Cruz resident and avid sports fisherman Chuck Mueller said, "I can't believe this. I've never experienced a no salmon season. I grew up here. I've fished here all my life. This isn't supposed to happen in the Monterey Bay."

Corey Ragan, a retail sales clerk at Bayside Marine at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor, said the shuttering of the season will mean the store could lose thousands of dollars in sales from now until September, the normal time period when salmon fishing is usually soaring.

"Salmon fishermen rely on us, but with no salmon fishing, I don't expect to see many salmon fishermen," she said. "I mean, we're talking about a long list of things they come in here to buy to prepare for the season. Knives to fillet the fish, synthetic bait like squid and octopus, flashers, hooks, skirts, lead and line."

The bridge over the Santa Cruz harbor would have been lined up bumper-to-bumper with the trucks and trailers of sport fishermen heading to the launch ramp last weekend. Bayside Marine would have been selling out of beer and bait. Instead, shop owner Todd Fraser said, "It's dead."

In Moss Landing last weekend, members of the Bay Sportsmen fishing club

gathered anyway to commiserate during a "nonopener" party hosted by the harbor master. They roasted a lamb and hired a band.

"There are people here who wait all year for this — and it just doesn't come," said Richard Kent, 65, of Sunnyvale, who stood around the lamb spit in Moss Landing. "It's like closing all the golf courses for some people."

But they all understand the bleak picture: In the fall, the number of chinook salmon that returned to the Sacramento River, which provides most of the salmon caught off the coasts of California and Oregon, fell to record lows. Scientists primarily blame poor ocean conditions that have disrupted the food chain, as well the diversion of Sacramento River water to Central Valley farms, leaving shallower, warmer waters for struggling salmon to spawn.

With the fish population in so much trouble, most fishermen are OK with the ban, said recreational fisherman Pat Miller from Santa Cruz.

"No one wants to catch the last salmon ever caught in life," Miller said.

Stagnaro sure doesn't. His family came to the United States in the 1870s, when his great-grandfather Cottardo Stagnaro emigrated from Italy.

At the peak of the family's holdings in the 1960s, the Stagnaros owned two restaurants, a fish market, a dozen fishing and sport vessels and two speed boats.

Now, it's down to Stagnaro's charter fishing boat Velocity, which he runs with his cousin, Dino; and the restaurant, owned by his last surviving uncle, Robert "Big Boy" Stagnaro, 79, and his two grown sons.

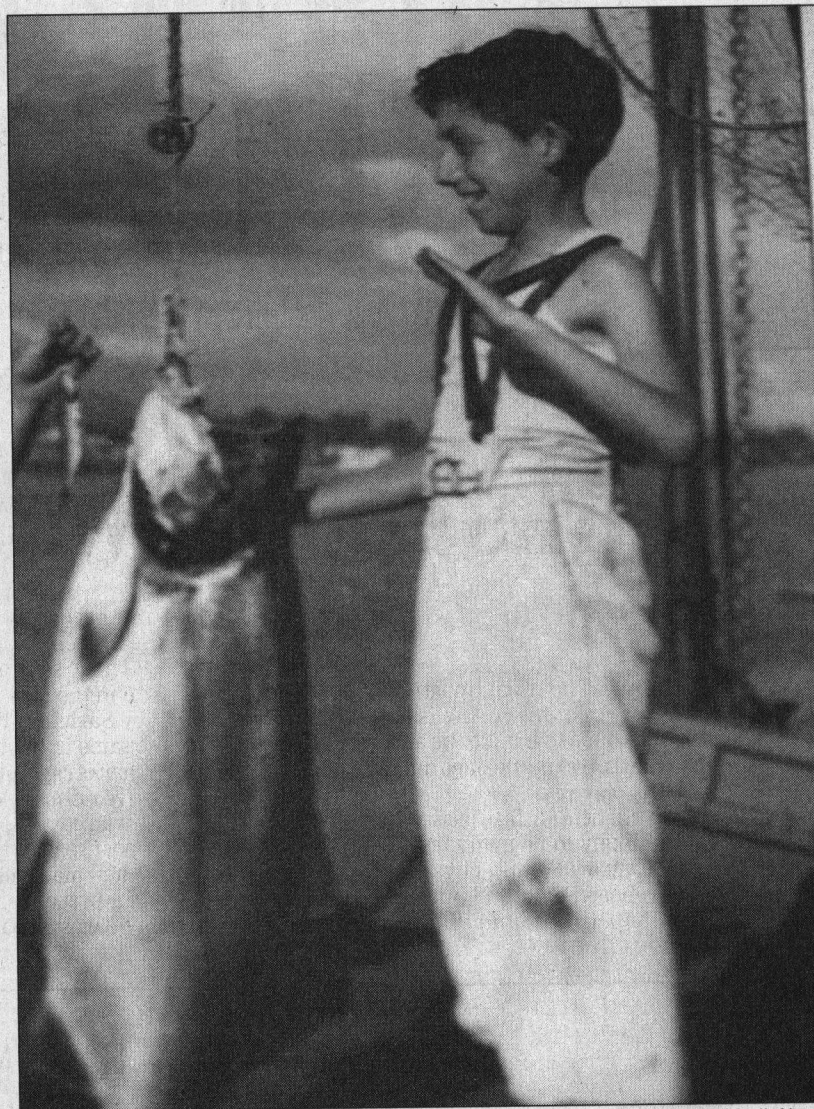
In a gray-and-green vinyl-covered booth at Gilda's earlier this week, with walls of windows looking out to white-capped waters on either side, Stagnaro sat next to his uncle, who still seats the patrons and runs the bar. The building shakes when cars drive across the wooden-planked pier. Seagulls squawk as they fly by. Sea lions lounging on cross bracing under the pilings yelp below.

Stagnaro gulped his coffee.

"I can't carry the brunt of ending the Stagnaro legacy of fishing on the ocean," he said. "I try to keep the business going, but ..."

"You're doing a wonderful job, Kenny," his uncle interjected, then said of the fourth generation, "They've got to weather the storm. They will. I'll help, Kenny."

The old man remembers the days when it was "all blood, sweat and tears put in by the family. We loved every minute of it and to work with a large family — how lucky we were."



Karen T. Borchers/MediaNews

The Stagnaro family has been in the fishing business ever since they arrived from Italy. They have a restaurant called Gilda's that is filled with historical photos from the early days. This is a photo from 1940 of Robert 'Big Boy' Stagnaro, now 79, posing with a salmon.

The younger Stagnaro, his forehead creased with a deep furrow, feels the pressure closing in from all sides.

The walls of Gilda's restaurant are covered with framed black-and-white photographs of the 10 Stagnaro siblings [five boys — including Robert — and five girls], the king and queen of the fishing derby, five Stagnaro boats tied up to the wharf labeled "The Biggest Fishing Fleet on the Coast 1961."

"I've been immersed in this my whole life," he said. "Sometimes I just want to go to the desert where it's warm and not foggy. Sometimes you just want to break from it."

He points to the old Stagnaro ticket shack that sits on the edge of the pier.

"Look at that," he said.

In the old days, the signage was sim-

ple. "Bay Cruises — Fishing Trips."

During the past five years, he's had to plaster several more signs advertising his latest ecotourism efforts to save the business: Whale watching, dolphin tours. Now he even offers "Scattering of Ashes."

He lies awake at night, thinking of new ways to make a living with the Velocity.

"I was thinking of making it a dock-side cafe," he said, "putting tables and chairs out on the deck and selling breakfast burritos and coffee to people walking by."

He doesn't want to be the Stagnaro to have it all go under.

Sentinel staff writer Tom Ragan contributed to this report.