

Salmon threatened by drought

State's rivers drying up as water diverted to farmlands

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Add the commercial salmon industry to potential drought victims as California rivers slow to a trickle, streams are pumped dry and salmon spawning beds turn to dirt. As a result, fish populations are sinking fast.

In the past three years the commercial salmon catch in California has dropped from 14 million tons to 4 million tons last year, and future harvests could be worse, says experts.

"California's salmon fishery has been the most affected of any industry in the state and it's an industry everybody has chosen to ignore," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

At fault, said Grader, is a mismanagement of water resources that sees huge amounts of water diverted to agricultural uses at the expense of the salmon fishing industry. According to fishery statistics, more water is pumped from the Sacramento River than flows into the San Francisco Bay.

The Sacramento River and San Joaquin Rivers systems are the state's primary salmon spawning grounds, and vital to the salmon fishing industry.

"Fish could historically survive droughts because we had rivers where the fish could go and find cool water," Grader said. "But with what we've done to the river system, and with the massive pumping — the major salmon rivers have basically been destroyed."

A number of fishing organizations, however, have begun to fight back, pushing for legislation that will not only protect water rights for fisheries, but provide drought relief for commercial fishermen.

What particularly bothers Grader is that much of the diverted water is used for federally subsidized farm crops.

"If the government is going to pay rice growers \$1,400 an acre not to raise a crop this year, then it sure as hell can afford to pay fishermen for the suffering they have already felt," Grader said.

"When you talk about water, ev-



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

Fishermen far outnumbered salmon and steelhead at the San Lorenzo River on opening day of steelhead season last fall.

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— Rick Peretto, Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project

erybody likes to bash LA swimming pools like they bash the LA Dodgers, but they should look at what's going on."

There is no question that the salmon population has been seriously affected by the drought statewide, especially in areas such as Santa Cruz, he said.

For the past five years the San Lorenzo River, the main salmon and steelhead habitat on the Central Coast, has resembled an anemic drainage ditch more than a river. Soquel Creek, Scott Creek and Waddell Creek are in similar dire straits.

About half of the water flow of the San Lorenzo, about 6 million gallons a day, is pumped out by the city to provide water to the city of Santa Cruz. What water

does make it down the river pools up in the river lagoon, unable to push through a sand bar and reach the ocean enabling the fish to enter the stream to spawn.

"The drought's had a drastic effect on the salmon, especially this year," Rick Peretto of the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project. "Almost no fish came into the (San Lorenzo) River. We had some early, but they knew something was wrong and turned around. Others died."

Local fishery workers were expecting salmon runs of 600 to 700 fish, but said only handfuls of fish entered the river. As the winter passed increasing numbers of fish were found dead, floating in the San Lorenzo River

lagoon.

Fishermen suspect a toxic spill is responsible. Samples of the fish and water have been sent off to state labs for testing. Although high levels of chromium, copper, and lead were discovered, the cause of the fish deaths has not yet been determined as the full results have not been completed.

Salmon, due to their three-year life cycle, are especially hard hit by the drought. Salmon typically spend a year living in streams before venturing into the ocean where they grow to maturity and then return to the streams in which they were spawned two years later.

Once the fish hit the reproductive cycle, their bodies change and even if they do not enter the

streams to spawn they die in the ocean.

If not for efforts of hatchery and conservation programs such as the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project, the local salmon populations would be extinct. Even in major river systems the salmon population is dependent upon hatcheries. As it is, fishery experts are deeply concerned about the effects of a continuing drought. State Fish and Game statistics record that some hatcheries have had no salmon return this year and that whole river systems have apparently stopped producing.

"If we get some rain there's a good chance of survival for 1993 and 1994," Grader said. "If not, it could destroy it. This could be the death knell. Most full time fishermen will be out of business."

The issues of salmon fishing and protection will be addressed in detail this weekend during the ninth annual Salmon, Steelhead and Trout Restoration Federation conference at the Loudon Nelson Center.