

Frozen salmon glut causes anglers 'strike'

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By PAUL BEATTY
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ -- Fresh-caught king salmon that should be at local markets and on restaurant tables today is swimming northward this morning because of a California fishermen's "strike" over low prices.

Friday, nearly all the fishermen at Santa Cruz harbor joined those from Pt. Arena to Morro Bay in staying ashore rather than trolling for salmon that is selling below this year's "fair price" because of a glutted frozen-salmon market.

Fishermen are saying the packaging companies over-bought and held back sales last year for better prices and they are now forcing the fishermen to bear the loss by cutting this season's prices.

A few buyers are offering \$1.75 a pound for large kings. Last year's price was around \$2.50 and this year's "fair price" is at \$2.45 a pound. It was at \$2.50 back in 1979, fishermen complain, pointing out the obvious: It hasn't gone any place since then.

"A lot of guys are in trouble. They can't afford to stay on strike and they can't afford to go fishing either," fisherman Bob Morrell said Saturday morning at Tom's Fisherman's Supply at the harbor.

As he spoke, the wet weather was moving in and fishermen were deciding they couldn't go out even if they could afford to. One man asked, "What wind flattens it (the ocean) out?" and was answered, "A north wind, but no wind at all is better."

Buyer Tim Flanagan who manages General Fish Company at Moss Landing confirms there is a glut which is keeping offering prices low.

His company made an offer "but it wasn't enough for them." He says it's a hardship on the fishermen, but the companies are caught with their freezers full.

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Buster Crabbe

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Salmon

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The loss of fishing days is crucial because the salmon are swimming northward and the offshore Santa Cruz waters get the early catch.

A number of the fishermen are represented by the Santa Cruz Commercial Fisherman's Market Association, which is affiliated with the coastal states' Pacific Coast Federation of Fisherman's Association.

The larger association hires an independent consultant each year to arrive at a "fair price" and fishermen say "they come in within a nickel" of the supply-and-demand prices that develop as the season unfolds.

This year's "fair price" of \$2.45 a pound for large salmon hasn't been accepted by the major buyers. Until they do, San Francisco won't offer to buy, nor will Moss Landing nor Santa Cruz, fishermen say. A meeting is set for Monday for further negotiations.

Friday, fishermen were saying someone was telling them they couldn't go out to make a catch without a market order from a buyer. Some who went out early and were standing off New Year's Island and Pigeon Point said they received radio messages they would lose their licenses if they threw out their lines.

They said the restriction was included in the state's Wanton Waste Law.

Attorney Dale Dawson of Scotts Valley, a fisherman who is representing a number of others, says state Fish and Game tells him the lack of a market order doesn't prevent fishing for salmon.

Dawson said some of the non-association fishermen had buyers paying up to \$3.50 a pound "but most of the guys honored the strike and they didn't go out Friday in a show of solidarity with association members."

Tony Crust is one of his clients and he was saying Saturday that there's a lot of interest in forming a selling cooperative for Monterey Bay fishermen.

Dawson says thinks a cooperative may be the way to go.

"The guys I represent support the association, but they can see that the brokers are putting the squeeze on the association. The way to put the squeeze on the brokers is to go around them by selling directly to the public and the market."

It would mean the cooperative would line up enough customers locally and away to take care its part of the 60,000 to 70,000 pounds of salmon that are caught by the bay fleet on a good day.

According to estimates from fishermen, a good day's catch can bring from \$100,000 to \$150,000.

"And for every \$1 we bring in, that's \$3 to the local economy," Morrell points out.

Dawson says that "until the pricing is straightened out, we're stuck with the frozen Alaskan salmon at the local markets."

That fish runs at \$1.79 to \$2.25 a pound to the consumer, but Dawson and Morell, and all other fishermen and gourmets in town, point out the frozen Alaska fish doesn't belong in the same ocean with the fresh-caught king salmon from off the Santa Cruz shoreline.

"A lot of it has 'belly burn' because it wasn't cleaned early. That's where the stomach acids discolor the flesh, or the meat is loose from the backbones," Morrell says.

Saturday morning, looking out over the choppy, gray sea, a fisherman said, "This will be murder when the weather clears. Every day will cost us and they'll get the catch up north. The buyers know they'll get the catch. This way, they get it when they want it. But people aren't getting fresh caught salmon because they're still dumping the frozen salmon."