

FISH & FISHING

Salmon season a bust

Fishermen sing blues from SC to Alaska

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SANTA CRUZ — In harbors from Santa Cruz to Alaska, commercial salmon boats are berthed in rows, marked with bright "for sale" signs. A disastrous year has driven many fishermen out of business.

In Alaska, the problem was a glut of fish that drove down salmon prices and destroyed the market, with salmon selling for as little as 45 cents a pound.

In California, Oregon and Washington, the problem was a lack of fish. Five years of drought lowered river levels, ruined spawning beds and devastated fish populations. The commercial catch fell from 14 million pounds off California in 1988 to around 4 million pounds this year at the recent close of the season.

"It was pretty bad, you better believe it," said local fisherman Victor Ghio. "I've never seen it this bad. It got so you couldn't even pay for fuel."

According to Santa Cruz harbor officials, as the salmon catch failed to improve, many local fishermen gave up after too many days of returning with empty holds.

As the fishermen went broke, so did some local businesses.

Bob Morrell Enterprises, a fish-products business at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor, was depending on a good salmon year to make up for a slow winter. When the salmon season died, the business failed and the owners went into bankruptcy, forcing them to also close their retail store and distribution business.

"It was a miserable year for salmon, both sport and commercial," said Steve Scheiblauber, harbor master. "There are a lot of boats for sale and that's the real barometer of how the season was."

Although salmon prices for fishermen were fairly high in Santa Cruz, fluctuating between about \$2 and \$3 a pound, a large number of fishermen from the Monterey Bay steamed up to Alaska, traditionally a rich and lucrative fishing

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grounds.

"They always make good money up there," said Ghio. "Down here things are really going against us."

This year things were different.

In Alaska plenty of fish were caught — in fact too many. Prices began to plummet as stocks of fish piled up with no buyers.

The Alaskan salmon industry is based on sockeye and pink salmon, which are usually canned or sold frozen to Japan and other Asian markets. The sockeye and pink salmon are considered slightly less desirable than king and coho salmon caught off California and the Northwest coast.

"The problem in Alaska is that they had good production, but simply have not diversified their marketing," said Zeke Grader, executive director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations.

"All of a sudden there was this big glut of fish on the market and Japan wasn't buying. There was a lot of Japan bashing going on, which is really unfortunate because we have grown to rely upon their market. They could have been taking up the slack down here."

The Alaskan fish wholesalers did not try to move their product into California and other areas in need of salmon, Grader said. The opening in the market was filled by farm-grown salmon from Norway and other European countries.

"Imported fish took up the slack during the season," said John Stagnaro of Stagnaro Brothers Seafood in Santa Cruz. "Now that the season is over it's the only thing we use."

As the imported fish came into local areas, wholesale salmon prices also fell.

"Not only have fishermen seen a decline in production (in California), they have seen a decline in price too," said Grader. "The supply-and-demand curve has gone haywire on this one."

In an attempt to stabilize prices for Alaskan fishermen, Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, has introduced legislation calling for sanctions against countries using drift-net fishing — which devastate salmon and other species — and requiring that negotiations over salmon prices be held prior to the salmon fishing season.

"Our fishermen have faced an extremely erratic market in recent years," Panetta said. "Prices have gone from as high as \$2.30 a pound to the ridiculous price of 45 cents a pound."

"If this were just the operation of the free market, fishermen would be more understanding of the problem. But the fact is, there are external factors that are at least partly responsible for the very low prices of recent years."

Drift-net fishing in the Pacific by Japan and Korea, which have begun to supply more of their country's fish, are believed to have contributed to the price crash in Alaska. Drift-nets are outlawed by many countries.

Panetta's bill seeks to impose sanctions against countries that do not prohibit large-scale drift-net fishing.

Grader, however, said such sanctions not been effective in the past, as they usually target those countries' exports of fish products. Countries which use drift-nets, such as Korea, do not export significant amounts of fish, he said.

"What you have to do," Grader said, "is to go after Korea and hit them with tariffs on their IBM computer clones and Hyundai cars — not fisheries."

The salmon fisheries off California are not expected to improve until the drought ends and salmon can reproduce again in great numbers.

"We've had two bad years now and we're looking at a couple of more," Grader said. "It's really devastating."