

Salmon rules may get tougher

Fish
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SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz commercial fishermen face a harsh cut in their salmon season this year under a new recommendation by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council.

The council, which proposes regulations for fish harvests off California, Oregon and Washington, wants to impose one of the toughest limits ever on salmon fishermen by holding down the days they can fish to only about 13 weeks this year.

"It's literally putting people out of business," said Mike Stiller of the Santa Cruz Commercial Fishermen's Marketing Association.

The move will not only hurt the people at sea, but local buyers and people who supply the fishing gear, according to Stiller, a longtime commercial fisherman.

"It's not only severe, but uncalled for," added Zeke Grader of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Association.

The recommendation comes as an unexpected blow since everyone went into this year with optimistic expectations for a good season, he said.

The move, Grader said, is a vindictive act from an agency that has been called "spineless in Seattle" for failing to protect coho salmon.

Under the new proposal, commercial fishermen between Point San Pedro near San Francisco and the Mexico border would only be allowed to harvest chinook salmon between May 1-31, June 23-July 18 and then again Sept. 1-30.

That totals just 87 days. The season was about seven weeks longer last year.

Closing the season for the bulk of June is particularly devastating for local fishermen because that's when many salmon are here and many of the competing sea lions leave, Stiller said.

The June 1-22 closing, he added, is for the entire coast, which means there will be no salmon during that time except for farm fish and salmon imported from Norway and other regions.

Local restaurants and markets are going to turn elsewhere for their fish.

"From a marketing point, it's just devastating," he said.

To officials with the management council, the recommendation is an attempt to help the Klamath and Snake River chinook salmon runs.

The recommendation heads to Washington for federal approval. A decision is expected before the season opens May 1.

A similar proposal was recommended last year by the Portland, Ore.-based council, but fishermen were able to negotiate a compromise.

This year, information came out of the blue, Grader said.

Fishermen have been a resilient group, but standing up to the latest challenge will be tough, he said.

"It's going to be a disaster," predicted Bert Holland, a Santa Cruz commercial fisherman who has been in the business since 1930.

The endangered species, he said, is the fisherman.