

Contact:

Ryan Schwartz

713-446-3736

ryan@salmonwaternow.org

CALIFORNIA WATER CRISIS - FISHERIES BACKGROUNDER

The reduction in water allotments for some agricultural growers in California's central valley has recently been generating national headlines. The story being told focuses on two environmental regulations that are being blamed for the water shortage. Yet left out of the story has been another food harvesting and production industry, and the families that have had their livelihoods collapse.

The commercial and sport fishing industries in California, which used to pump billions of dollars into the economy, have been completely lost for two years. The Central Valley agricultural story is dramatic when you see a field not planted, but the fishing equivalent is more than 13 MILLION ACRES of ocean that lay fallow because there are no fish to fish. Families that relied on those fish are hurting and coastal communities are struggling.

This is a story worth telling - one that brings a new perspective on the state's water crisis. Please consider the below facts and spokespeople for this untold story.

California fisheries have collapsed.

For two consecutive years, commercial salmon fishing has been completely banned in California and Oregon. The herring fishery has also been severely curtailed, and freshwater flows from the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta are important for the longevity of striped bass, sturgeon, California halibut, Dungeness crabs, and oysters. The decline of these fisheries has increased food prices and seafood imports (The United States now imports 83% of its seafood from overseas).

In addition, the recreational fishing industry, which helps drive coastal tourism has been severely restricted.

22,825 jobs and \$1.375 Billion are being lost.

The people in California that rely on these fisheries, including fishermen, gear manufacturers, boat builders and suppliers, dockworkers, fuelers, distributors, grocers, chefs, sport fishers and those that provide them tourist services, are all affected by the disappearance of fish. Based on data from the National Marine Fisheries Service, if the population of salmon alone returned to its levels in 2004-2005, an estimated 22,285 jobs and \$1.375 billion in commercial and sport fishing would be added to California's economy (Study available upon request).

In California alone, there are 2.4 million recreational anglers who generate as much as \$4 billion in economic activity each year, according to the American Sportfishing Association.

Keeping a tiny fraction of available water in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta can restore the fisheries and keep the entire coastal ecosystem from collapse.

The water restrictions imposed as part of the Endangered Species Act were based on environmental reviews under both the Bush and Obama administrations, and seek to protect a number of species critical to the health of the entire ecosystem.

The first opinion issued by the US Fish and Wildlife Service on December 15, 2008 concerns the delta smelt, and requires an estimated 480,000 acre-feet of water to remain in the delta annually. The second order, on June 4, 2009 by the National Marine Fisheries Service, protects salmon, sturgeon, steelhead, and orca whales and restricts 330,000 acre-feet of water a year, although it has yet to take effect.

Together, the two federal orders require an estimated 810,000 acre-feet of water to annually remain in the delta. The California Department of Water Resources estimates 34 million acre-feet are used annually for crop irrigation. In other words, 2.3% of water used annually for agriculture is being kept in rivers to maintain an entire ecosystem and the lives that depend on it.

Solutions are being proposed that would allow both agriculture and fisheries to flourish.

Conservation, water-recycling, and water management programs can be quickly implemented to increase the available water supply in both the delta and the valley. In addition, rain-water capture systems can be employed throughout the state. While many farmers have personally invested in more efficient irrigation technology, the expansion of water-saving practices can be supported by state officials and federal subsidies and tax breaks. Finally, water speculation, the popular process of receiving subsidized water from the federal government and selling it for profit on the open market, can be outlawed.

Experienced spokespeople are available for interview:

Mike Hudson, President of the Small Boat Commercial Salmon Fishermen's Association
"We have been completely out of work for two years now. The entire coast from Central California to Northern Oregon is devastated. By pumping too much water from the delta, we are trading our coastal economies and a nutritious locally caught food for almonds to be exported overseas - and that's nuts!," said Hudson.

Larry Collins, President of the San Francisco Crab Boat Owners Association
"Our livelihoods are collapsing yet the valley has more tomatoes this year than ever. Something is fishy here and I know it's not our rivers," said Collins.

Zeke Grader, Executive Director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

“Restoring Pacific fisheries will pump billions of dollars back into the ailing economy and help secure our national food supply. These fish support thousands of families and are a local, nutritious food source,” said Grader.

Dave Bitts, President of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations
“This is not about either fish or farms. It's about how we use our limited, vastly oversubscribed water resources wisely in order to have both,” said Bitts.

Sharon Moores, President of Virg's Sport Fishing in Morro Bay, CA
"Salmon accounted for 18 to 20 per cent of our income. It brought out a lot of people that stayed in motels, ate at restaurants, and bought tons of gear and tack," said Moores

Kelly Bennett, fish buyer for Scoma’s Restaurant, San Francisco, CA
“We try and support the fishermen we know, but the closure of the salmon fishery makes that more difficult. We’ve been lucky to be able to source fish from other locations, but it also puts pressure on other fish. Last year was worse and next year scares the hell out of me,” said Bennett.

B-Roll available at www.salmonwaternow.org.

About Salmon Water Now!:

Salmon Water Now! is a coalition that raises public awareness of the plight of wild California salmon, and the communities dependent on healthy freshwater delta flows, by creating and distributing videos, podcasts, and other resources.