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Opinion: Water mismanagement is killing off our salmon fisheries

By Peter Grenell
Special to the Mercury News
Posted: 04/18/2010 08:00:00 PM PDT

For West Coast harbors, salmon mean business. The obverse is also a true — a lack of salmon means a lack of business.

For the past two years, there has been no salmon fishing due to greatly reduced stocks. Even if there is a token season this year, it will do little or nothing to revive the fortunes of the commercial fleet and the myriad businesses that depend indirectly on salmon, such as boat and tackle retailers, fuel purveyors, charter operators, restaurants and motels.

The absence of salmon also affects our harbor district and other harbor administrations, which collected significant revenues from salmon-related businesses when the fishery was flourishing.

The collapse of California's salmon fishery is due to human mismanagement, not the vagaries of nature. By allowing unrestrained and irresponsible pumping from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and ignoring the established science on the biological requirements of anadromous fish, we have brought our wild salmon to the brink of extinction.

As the general manager of the San Mateo County Harbor District, I see the impacts of a devastated fishery and a hollowed-out fleet every day. The statistics confirm that economic disruption and real human misery are playing out along the California coast. In the Bay Area, this is particularly evident at Pillar Point Harbor, which was established as a harbor of refuge for the commercial fishing fleet.

Since the salmon fishery

collapsed, Pillar Point's transient dockage fees are down 25 percent and boat launch fees are off by more than 22 percent. Typically, Pillar Point berth occupancy stands at 100 percent. During a busy salmon season, occupancy ran as high as 103 percent; we would accommodate the extra boats via rafting and mooring. In 2008, berth occupancy dropped to 87 percent, and it is still down substantially.

We also see far fewer visitors to the harbor. The parking lots were always full during the salmon season. These days, they are almost empty. We run an off-the-boat retail sales program at Pillar Point, where commercial fishermen sell their catch directly to customers. We still get visitors during the Dungeness crab, rockfish and albacore seasons, but the real draw has always been the salmon. Today, that market is gone.

How have the salmon season closures affected the San Mateo County Harbor District? It has been a disaster — literally. We had to apply for Federal Disaster Relief funds to mitigate for the loss of

fishing. The district received more than \$83,000 in total in disaster relief for 2008 and 2009.

Other harbors along the California coast have experienced similar downturns. The Port of Santa Cruz, for example, typically posted zero vacancies for its 900 berths. Since 2008, vacancies have hovered at 5 percent. That may not seem like much, but a berthing loss of even a few points can have devastating financial impacts on a harbor. In Santa Cruz, berthing revenue losses are now running at \$120,000 a year. Gross concession sales are down by \$300,000 to \$400,000 annually.

These numbers demonstrate that the loss of the salmon season affects more than fishermen. Compounding this tragedy is the fact that it could have been avoided.

Salmon are the basis of a sustainable economy. They are good business, the kind of business California needs. We have pushed salmon and the fishing industry to the edge — but with some will and guts, we can bring them back. To do anything less is unacceptable.

PETER GRENNELL is the general manager of the San Mateo County Harbor District. He wrote this article for this newspaper.

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