

Fishermen try to save Chinook salmon in delta

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Pummeled by two straight years of canceled fishing seasons, enraged salmon fishermen held an emotional call-to-arms in San Francisco Thursday, vowing to fight to save the vanishing Chinook salmon.

They were joined by Reps. George Miller, D-Martinez, Mike Thompson, D-Napa, and other officials who promised to push for tougher restrictions on water diversions to farms and cities in Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley. Fishermen largely blame the decline in salmon on the water diversions.

"That one side of the state gets to rip off the other side is not sustainable, politically or environmentally," Miller said at the standing-room-only Salmon Summit at Fort Mason. "For 10 years they've violated the laws and the science in the name of greed. But we've beat them before and we'll beat them again."

Federal regulators will issue a decision in about two weeks on whether they will allow a commercial salmon season this year.

Fishermen and their allies say the two years of canceled salmon seasons have cost California \$2.8 billion in revenue and at least 23,000 jobs. Fishermen, harbors, restaurants, bait shops and myriad other businesses that rely on salmon have seen income drop dramatically, in some cases entirely.

"I don't know if we can survive another year without the salmon," said Bob Boucke, a fishing tackle dealer from Yuba City, who said he's lost \$500,000 a year since the salmon season was first canceled in 2008 and has been forced to lay off six of his 10 employees.

The primary culprit is San Joaquin farmers, fishermen say. A record amount of fresh water

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from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta is being pumped to farmers, who are using the water to grow especially thirsty crops like cotton, they said.

From 2003 to 2007, an average of 6 million acre-feet of water a year was pumped south, more than twice the amount diverted in the late 1960s, according to the California Department of Water Resources.

Meanwhile, salmon populations have plummeted to a record low. Historically, millions of salmon a year swam through the Golden Gate and delta and up rivers and streams to spawn. In 2002 that number hit 800,000 a year - the highest total in several decades - but in 2009 only 39,000 salmon made the trip, according to Jon Rosenfeld, conservation biologist with the Bay Institute.

The churning delta pumps crush younger salmon and in some cases actually reverse the flow of the San Joaquin River, confusing older fish. Salmon are also suffering from warmer water temperatures and nonnative predators such as striped bass.

"These are tough, hearty fish. All they want is cold water and gravel," Rosenfeld said. "If these fish are disappearing, that means we have done some very serious damage to the ecosystem, and it's getting that much closer to us. When is that signal going to be loud enough for us to hear?"

Farmers agree that the delta is broken and desperately needs fixing. But stopping water diversions to the Central Valley is not the answer, said Sarah Woolf, spokeswoman for the Westlands Water District, which represents 600 farmers in Fresno and Kings counties.

"Pumps are an easy thing to focus on, and yes, there is no question they're killing marine life," she said. "But they've been killing marine life for 40 years. The drastic downturn in salmon has many causes aside from pumps."

In 2007 U.S. District Judge Oliver Wanger ordered significant reductions in the amount of water sucked from the delta, in an effort to save the smelt, salmon and other beleaguered species.

Since the ruling, farms and Southern California cities have forgone about 500,000 acre-feet a year, Woolf said.

"All that water is back in the delta, but the salmon numbers are still declining," she said. "But I

think we all agree that water delivery in California has to be resolved. The state will not survive otherwise."

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