

High Country News

For people who care about the West

Last rites in salmon country?

by Matt Jenkins

On a bright April morning, most of the tourists at San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf were gravitating toward the Wax Museum and the T-shirt shops. But aboard the small fleet of fishing boats tied up here, authentic local color was in no short supply. Clouds of blue invective billowed from the wheelhouse of a boat called the *Autumn Gale*, where a thick-necked, walrus-mustached fisherman named Larry Collins lit up one cigarette after another and held forth on the dismal recent history of salmon fishing.

The seamiest days of life at the Wharf -- a time replete with tales of crooked fishmongers and game wardens found floating face down in the water -- are largely over. But an aura of guardedness still hangs over the 35-boat fleet here. Not long ago, before the cell-phone revolution, fishermen's seemingly idle radio chatter about "pork chops" and "eggs Benedict" was actually a coded reference to how hot the fishing was.

Despite such circumspection, the Wharf's fishermen stand as defenders of the civic character in a city that loves its food. And each summer, local devotees line up for the "first kings" these boats bring back -- the king, or chinook, salmon that are just beginning the fall run to their home streams in the Central Valley.

"When I'm fishing, I make 5,000 decisions a day," says Collins, who is 52 and the vice president of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations (PCFFA). "And every decision you make, it makes or breaks you: You drown; you go bankrupt; you come in with the glory and a hold full of fish. It's all on you."

This year, Collins and other California fishermen face an agonizing choice: Whether to gear up for a season that could not only leave them in the red, but may also jeopardize the future of struggling salmon populations.

The past five years have already been harrowing, with a round of fishing bans to protect declining salmon runs in the Klamath River near the California-Oregon border. While those stocks are now in better shape, the main population of local salmon -- the celebrated

Sacramento River fall run of chinooks -- is in steep decline. For the past two years, the federal government has banned commercial salmon fishing in California and most of Oregon.

Then, in April, Collins and other fishermen received what seemed like good news. The Pacific Fishery Management Council, a 14-member assembly that makes fishing recommendations to the federal government, voted to open salmon season in California and Oregon. But, particularly in California, the season will be just a fraction of what it once was: Beginning July 1, some 400 commercial fishing boats could be chasing roughly 33,500 salmon.

"It works out to about 90 fish a boat. Eight years ago, you'd catch that in a morning," Collins says, and then pauses. "I'm hoping a lot of guys aren't going to bother."

Until about a half century ago, California's Central Valley, which sprawls across nearly half of the state, was a super-sized incubator for wild salmon. Cold snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada allowed fish to spawn even through the heat of the summer, and young salmon headed down the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers virtually year-round. The maze of tidal marshes and small waterways in the delta at the mouth of the two rivers were rich with food, and beyond that lay the protein-stuffed waters of the Pacific.

But after a spirited run of dam-building, water pumping, levee construction and agricultural and urban development -- and fishing -- the recent history of salmon is far from inspiring. In the past 15 years, spring and winter runs of chinook have been declared threatened and endangered by the state and federal governments, and the commercially vital fall run of Sacramento River chinook is being watched as a "species of concern." That run is heavily boosted with hatchery-raised fish, but returns were still so low that the Pacific Fishery Management Council shut down commercial salmon fishing the past two years.

In 1992, when it first became clear that populations were declining, Congress issued a mandate that the number of Central Valley salmon be doubled. But in the 18 years since, that directive has been ignored. The amount of water pumped from the Delta -- which goes partly to cities in Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area, but primarily to farms in the San Joaquin Valley -- has steadily increased, reaching an all-time high in 2005. Finally, in 2007, at the beginning of three years of drought, a federal judge ordered that pumping be cut back to protect plummeting populations of salmon and a fish called the Delta smelt.

That hit a group of San Joaquin valley irrigation districts with "junior" water contracts especially hard. Last year, their water supplies were reduced to just 10 percent of their total contract amounts, and they have been aggressively lobbying against the pumping restrictions. This spring, Democratic Congressmen Jim Costa and Dennis Cardoza and Republican George Radanovich, who represent the valley, wrote to Gary Locke, the Cabinet secretary who oversees

the federal salmon-protection program, to decry a "double standard" of allowing salmon fishing while farmers still face water cutbacks. Then in April, Dianne Feinstein, the Democratic senator and former mayor of San Francisco, joined Costa and Cardoza in again complaining that "tens of thousands of acre-feet (of water) are now flowing unchecked past the pumps and into the ocean."

Despite those water cutbacks, California still managed to grow its largest tomato crop in history last year. The 13.3-million-ton harvest was so big, in fact, that some farmers tilled a portion of their crop back into the ground. "It's the greediest bunch of creeps I've ever seen in my life," says fisherman Collins. "We haven't worked in two years, and they're crying like little girls."

And while the production of water-intensive, subsidized commodity crops like cotton has fallen dramatically in recent years, much of that has been made up by an increase in perennial crops like grapes and almonds. In 1992, California had 446,000 acres of almond trees; by 2008, it had nearly twice that amount. For fishermen, that crop stands as a bitter irony. "We were supposed to double the salmon population," Collins says, "but what happened was we doubled the almond population."

In April, when the Pacific Fishery Management Council met to decide whether to allow fishing this year, its analysts projected that commercial fishermen in Oregon and California could safely harvest about 93,000 salmon from all runs. Roughly a third will likely be caught by boats from ports along the California coast.

For fishermen in North Coast towns like Fort Bragg and Eureka, the announcement was particularly welcome news. They were shut out from fishing not just the past two years, but also in 2005 and 2006, when the season was severely restricted to protect runs from the Klamath River. Many of them, tired of relying on disaster relief money, are ready to go after whatever fish the council will allow.

But some fishermen worry that the model the council uses to predict salmon returns may have overestimated the available catch. As with all statistical models, when the sample size decreases -- as it has with Sacramento fall-run chinook -- the margin of error increases. Last year, when there was no fishing, just a third of the chinook that were expected to return actually did. A comparable error this year could allow more fish to be caught than the population can sustain. Marija Vojkovich, a California Department of Fish and Game manager who represents the state on the council, acknowledges that the model results are relatively less reliable than in years with large returns. But, she says, "If the data show that there are opportunities (to fish), then we want to provide those."

For fishermen, though, the political fallout from a botched season would be high. "The political

aspect, frankly, is the Valley Boys," says PCFFA Executive Director Zeke Grader, referring to Congressmen Costa, Cardoza and Radanovich. If the salmon are hit too hard by fishermen, he says, "we're gonna hear about it relentlessly from them."

Vojkovich says the council built a safety buffer into its numbers by setting a more conservative target for "spawning escapement" -- the number allowed past fishermen's hooks to return to their home streams to breed -- than in previous years. And for the second half of the season, the council also put quotas on the number of fish that could be caught, rather than simply allowing unlimited fishing for a fixed number of days, as it has traditionally done.

But even if the target for the fishery is ecologically sustainable, fishermen worry that they may go broke trying to catch those fish. It can cost several thousand dollars to ready a boat for a season, plus fuel, groceries and supplies. If salmon sells for \$5 a pound dockside, fishermen in California could gross as little as \$4,600 per boat.

"The nightmare scenario," says Grader, "is that people feel that they're going to have to gear up" even if it doesn't make economic sense to do so. If fishermen voluntarily sit out this season, they may not be eligible for disaster money in the future. And a fisherman's continued eligibility to fish often depends on being able to prove a consistent history of fishing. Staying off the water for a year can destroy that history.

This spring, PCFFA took up the question of whether to ask the council to cancel the season. But with many fishermen on the North Coast pressing to go fishing, the federation failed to reach consensus. In April, as a last-minute compromise, PCFFA proposed language to the council that it "does not encourage wide-spread troller participation this year in the California fishery," and that if a fisherman sits out this year, he won't waive future eligibility to fish or receive disaster relief. But that proposal came late enough that the council punted. "This was the last minute before we did a vote," says Vojkovich, "so I think that most of us were uncomfortable with just (adopting) that."

Back at Fisherman's Wharf, a driver for a seafood distributor rolled his truck to a stop alongside Larry Collins and stuck his head out the window. He had just heard about the numbers for this season: "So salmon's kind of bogus, huh?"

"We're goin'. We're goin'," Collins answered. "I'm still conflicted, but I haven't eaten a piece of salmon in two years. We'll go fishing every day that we're allowed to."