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“Fishery Failure” Declared for West Coast Salmon Fishery *Declaration Clears Path for Congressional Action*

Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez today declared a commercial fishery failure for the West Coast salmon fishery due to historically low salmon returns. Also today, NOAA’s Fisheries Service issued regulations to close or severely limit recreational and commercial salmon fishing in the area.

“The unprecedented collapse of the salmon population will hit fishermen, their families, and fishing communities hard, and that is why we have moved quickly to declare a fishery disaster,” Gutierrez said. “Our scientists are working to better understand the effects that ocean changes have on salmon populations. We are also working closely with fishing communities to improve salmon habitat in river systems to support sustainable fishing.”

Hundreds of thousands of fall Chinook salmon typically return to the Sacramento River every year to spawn. This year, scientists estimate that fewer than 60,000 adult Chinook will make it back to the Sacramento River.

“This is far below what is needed to sustain the population and we have decided to shut down the commercial ocean salmon fishery for all of California and most of Oregon to aid their recovery,” said Jim Balsiger, NOAA’s Fisheries Service acting assistant administrator. “It’s a tough decision, but the condition of the salmon fishery forces us to close most of it to ensure healthy runs of this valuable fish in the future.”

Although the reasons for the sudden decline of the fishery are not completely understood, NOAA scientists suggest that changes in ocean conditions, including unfavorable shifts in ocean temperature and food sources for juvenile salmon, likely caused poor survival of salmon that would have comprised this year’s fishery. Loss of freshwater habitat for salmon spawning, rearing, and migration to the ocean is a chronic problem that has made salmon populations more susceptible to the occasional poor ocean conditions. NOAA will undertake a thorough examination of the causes.

Coho salmon stocks off Washington and northern Oregon, while in slightly better shape, are still far below normal, and there will be substantially curtailed commercial fishing off those areas as well. A small recreational fishery off Oregon’s northern coast and targeted on hatchery-produced coho salmon will be allowed.

The disaster declaration opens the door for Congress to appropriate money towards alleviating the financial hardship caused by the fishery disaster.

Under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Commerce Secretary can declare a commercial fishery failure if requested to do so by a governor, or at the Secretary’s discretion. The Secretary must determine that the commercial fishery failure resulted from a fishery resource disaster due to natural causes, man-made causes beyond the control of fishery managers, or undetermined causes.