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**SECRETARY OF COMMERCE DALEY DECLARES COMMERCIAL FISHERIES FAILURE
IN ALASKA'S BRISTOL BAY/KUSKOKWIM/YUKON SALMON FISHERIES**

In response to the record low returns of salmon in the Bristol Bay, Kuskokwim, and Yukon River areas of Alaska, Secretary of Commerce William M. Daley today declared a commercial fishery failure in the region. This declaration paves the way for Congress to provide economic support to commercial fishermen and small fishery-dependent businesses that have sustained heavy uninsured losses.

For the second year in a row the Commerce Department has used its legislative authority under section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act to declare a commercial fishery failure in Alaska salmon fisheries. Alaska Governor Tony Knowles formally requested the declaration in a letter to Secretary Daley, after the salmon runs projected for the three areas were 73 percent below the long-term average catch.

Secretary Daley recently met with Senator Ted Stevens and Governor Knowles in Alaska and toured the impacted region. "I have personally met with many fishermen who are still suffering from last year's disaster and its continuation will have significant adverse social and economic impacts," Daley said. "The dependence of these isolated communities on the salmon fishery makes this second declaration of a fishery failure particularly difficult."

According to National Marine Fisheries Service scientists the exact cause of the unexpectedly low returns of salmon is unknown, but evidence points to a marine ecological event. "We believe low survival rates of salmon in the open ocean may be one of the hidden impacts of the extend El Niño event we have recently experienced," said Daley. Unusual weather patterns in 1997 and 1998 are well documented, with water temperatures at record high levels in the Bering Sea.

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The declaration will allow any financial assistance that may be provided by Congress to be used to assess the economic and social effects of the commercial fishery failure on fishermen and their communities, as well as to support any activity that would restore or prevent a similar failure in the future. The Act limits the federal share of the cost of any relief activity to 75 percent.

The commercial fishery failure occurred as a result of the inordinately poor runs of sockeye, chum, and king salmon in the Bristol Bay, Kuskokwim River, and Yukon River areas. According to data supplied by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the 1998 overall salmon catches in western Alaska were the poorest in two decades. The Bristol Bay harvest of 9.9 million sockeye salmon was less than half the forecast catch of 20.6 million salmon, and lower than the harvest of 12.4 million sockeye in 1997, which also was determined by NMFS to be a disaster that year. In the Kuskokwim River, the 1998 harvest was only 60 percent of the forecast of 300,000 chums and had a value of less than \$200,000 for Kuskokwim River fishermen. In the Yukon River, the harvest of 43,000 king salmon in 1998 was the poorest since statehood, and the total return of Yukon River king salmon is believed to be the lowest in this century.

Under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Secretary of Commerce may, at his discretion or at the request of a governor, declare a commercial fisheries failure due to a fishery resource disaster. The Secretary must determine that a fishery resource disaster resulted from either natural causes, man-made causes beyond the control of fishery managers, or undetermined causes.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The agency conducts scientific research, marine fisheries management, trade and industry assistance, law enforcement, and protected species and habitat conservation.

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