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/ KLAMATH

Yurok Tribe Warns of ‘Most Catastrophic Fisheries Collapse in Klamath River History’

Press release from the Yurok Tribe:

The Yurok Tribe is bracing for the far-reaching economic, cultural, and social challenges created by what is expected to be the most catastrophic fisheries collapse in the Klamath River’s history.

The number of fall Chinook salmon predicted to return to the river in 2017 — approximately 11,000 fish — is the lowest on record, a result of two consecutive, juvenile fish disease outbreaks and other contributing factors. The Tribe’s 2017 allocation, set by the Pacific Fisheries Management Council, will likely be about 650 fish or one fish for every 10 Tribal members. In response to the all-time low forecast, the Yurok Tribe will not have a commercial fishery for a second year in row to protect salmon stocks. This unprecedented fisheries crash will have real consequences for the Yurok people, whose traditions, lives and livelihoods are intimately connected to the Klamath River and its salmon.

“This is a nightmare. I have never in my life dreamed that it could get this bad,” said Thomas P. O’Rourke Sr., Chairman of the Yurok Tribe. “This is devastating to our people, not only physically but emotionally. It’s saddening and hard to believe.”

Yurok Fisheries Technician Tacheenee Napooi Shorty examines a salmon scale. Photo: Yurok Tribe.

The bleak 2017 forecast is linked to a three-punch combination, comprised of two straight years of extremely elevated juvenile fish disease levels, diminished river conditions and poor ocean health. In 2014 and 2015, when juveniles from this year’s projected return of adult salmon were rearing in the river, 81 percent and 91 percent of sampled juvenile salmon were infected by the pathogen *Ceratonova shasta*, a parasite that is often fatal for fish and favors warm, slow-moving water.

In 2016, the Yurok Tribe had no commercial salmon season because there were not enough fish to meet subsistence and ceremonial needs. Selling fish, when there are so few, is antithetical to the Yurok Constitution, which mandates that the Tribe “manage and prudently harvest” salmon from the Klamath River. In January 2017, the US

Department of Commerce officially declared the 2016 Yurok fishery a “commercial fishery failure”.

Back-to-back years’ of extremely small salmon runs negatively affects the Yurok economy, community, and culture. For many Tribal families, the fall commercial fishery typically means having dependable food and financial security. Chinook salmon is a staple on the Yurok Reservation, where there are no grocery stores and many tribal members continue to subsist on fish and other traditionally harvested foods. The lack of salmon undermines the Tribe’s ability to pass on cultural and religious traditions to the next generation. The loss of salmon also harms Tribal member and tribal-owned tourism businesses, which provide numerous jobs on the reservation.

“In Yurok Country, two years without a commercial fishing season has an impact that is similar to a plant shutting down in a one-company town,” Chairman O’Rourke said. “We are doing everything in our power to find ways to help our people to supplement their lost income. We have people who haven’t been able to catch up on bills for two years.”

Last week, the Yurok Tribal Council held a special work session to begin developing a strategy to make up for the loss of fish and fishing income.

“We are in crisis mode. The Klamath is our grocery store, our church and our main highway. It’s our lifeline. We will leave no stone unturned in search of additional short-term and long-term solutions to address the most terrible fisheries disaster in the Tribe’s history,” said Chairman O’Rourke.

Tribe takes additional actions to protect Klamath River salmon.

In the past few months, the Tribe has won two lawsuits, both of which produced new protections for Klamath salmon. In one of the cases, the Tribe, in collaboration with other tribes and conservation groups, brought an Endangered Species Act challenge against the Bureau of Reclamation and National Marine Fisheries Service over the extremely high *C. shasta* infection rates in 2014 and 2015. On February 8, 2017 a federal district court judge agreed with the Tribe’s claim and ordered BOR to develop a strategic water release plan to combat the fish disease. Using the Tribe’s scientific recommendations, the judge granted a tactical increase in winter and spring flows designed to markedly reduce infection rates among young salmon.

The second fish friendly decision came out of the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, where the San Luis & Delta-Mendota Water Authority and Westlands Water District challenged BOR’s ability to release water from the Trinity River Division to combat fish disease — and prevent another fish kill — in the lower Klamath River. On February, 21, 2017, a panel of three judges, in agreement with the Tribe, determined that the BOR “had the authority to implement the...release of Trinity River water” to avert another fish kill.

While these victories will have real benefits for fish, the salmon runs will continue to struggle until the lower four Klamath dams, which are a primary driver of the juvenile

disease problem and water quality issues, are removed. A March 2016 agreement between the Tribe, States of California and Oregon, as well as dam owner PacifiCorp and other stakeholders, planned the removal of the dams by 2020. The Tribe is working hard to ensure the dam removal process continues as planned and salmon can finally return to the upper reaches of the river. If the dams are removed it will be a major step toward the restoration of the Klamath River, however it does little to address the direct social consequences attached to the looming salmon disaster.